# The Science of Text Levels

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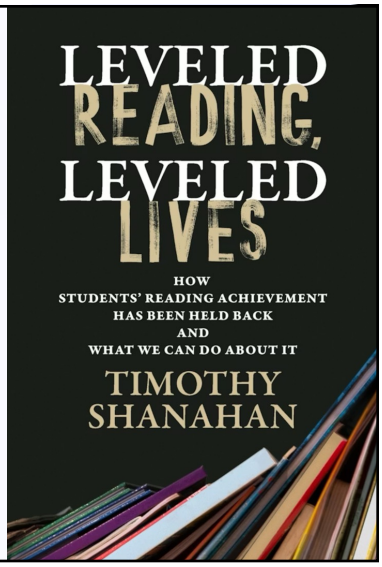
# New Book

Harvard Education Press, 2025

This presentation explores groundbreaking research that challenges traditional approaches to reading comprehension instruction. We'll examine evidence-based methods for using complex texts to accelerate student learning rather than limiting it through text leveling.

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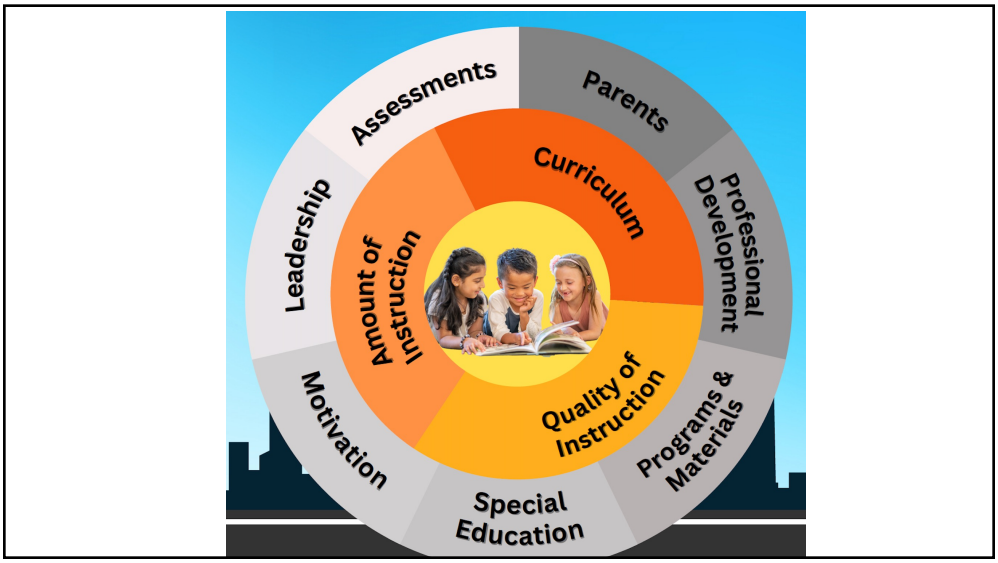


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## Amount of Instruction

Effective reading instruction begins with ensuring students receive **adequate amounts** of quality instruction. This fundamental principle recognizes that reading development requires sustained, consistent practice across multiple components.

Not all students learn at the same pace, which is why we implement interventions for those who need additional support. However, it's crucial that Tier 1 instruction addresses *all aspects* of reading development comprehensively, while Tier 2 interventions can focus on specific areas where students struggle.

Time allocation matters significantly–each key aspect of reading development deserves sufficient instructional time to develop properly.

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## Essential Curriculum Components

### Word Knowledge

Decoding skills, spelling patterns, morphological structure, and vocabulary meaning work together to build comprehensive word understanding.

### Text Reading Fluency

Accuracy, automaticity, and prosody combine to create smooth, expressive reading that supports comprehension.

### Reading Comprehension

Language processing, world knowledge, and strategic thinking enable students to construct meaning from text.

### Writing

Transcription skills and composition abilities reinforce reading development through active text creation.

These four pillars must work in harmony, with each component receiving appropriate instructional attention and support.

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## Quality of Instruction Matters

### General Quality Indicators

- Clear instructional purpose
- Information presented with clarity
- Minimization of disruptions
- Regular review and practice
- Student engagement strategies
- Systematic progress monitoring

### Curriculum-Specific Quality

- Mouth visibility during phonemic awareness
- Embedded mnemonics in phonics instruction
- Modeling techniques in fluency development
- Sufficient challenge level in fluency and comprehension
- Strategic scaffolding approaches

Quality instruction requires both general pedagogical excellence and specific techniques tailored to each component of reading development.

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## Two Major Comprehension Instruction Strands

### Directed or Guided Reading

Communal reading of a text with teacher guidance throughout the process. Students experience reading the text while receiving teacher support.

### Targeted Explicit Instruction

Focused practice with specific skills outside of extended reading contexts. Examples include vocabulary lessons, sentence comprehension exercises, and cohesion practice.

Both approaches have merit and serve different purposes in a comprehensive reading program. The key is knowing when and how to use each approach effectively.

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## Reading is Developmental

Beginning readers in grades K-1 face texts that are challenging specifically because of their **decoding demands**. Young learners need to develop fundamental skills with **decodable texts** and **controlled vocabulary texts.**

However, this doesn't mean limiting their exposure to rich language and complex ideas. Teachers should *expose young students to more sophisticated content through read-alouds*, building their listening comprehension and background knowledge.

Once students achieve a high first-grade reading level, they possess sufficient decoding skills to benefit from more challenging texts.

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## The Dominance of Leveled Reading

Leveled reading has become the predominant instructional approach in American classrooms, with most teachers using texts **below grade level** for instruction (Shanahan, 2013; Griffith & Duffett, 2018).

This widespread practice stems from an *untested theory from the 1940s* claiming students learn best when taught from texts at their "reading levels" rather than grade levels. The theory gained popularity despite lacking empirical support.

Most comprehension instruction now consists of having students read "instructional level" texts about which they answer questions presumed to provide them practice with essential comprehension skills.

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## Reconceptualizing Reading

> Reading comprehension is not the ability to answer certain kinds of text questions. Reading is the ability to make sense of ideas expressed in text–the ability to negotiate the linguistic and conceptual barriers or affordances of a text.

This fundamental shift in thinking changes everything about how we approach comprehension instruction. Instead of simplifying texts, we must help students develop the skills to navigate complexity.

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## Four Common Classroom Responses to Text Complexity

1. **Avoid complex texts entirely**
   Replace the challenging texts with those at the students' levels.
2. **Tell students what the texts say.**
   Replace the challenging text with teacher presentation.
3. **Read the text to the students.**
   Avoid the challenge by doing the reading for the kids.
4. **Ignoring the problem.**
   Using complex text but without supportive scaffolding or instruction.

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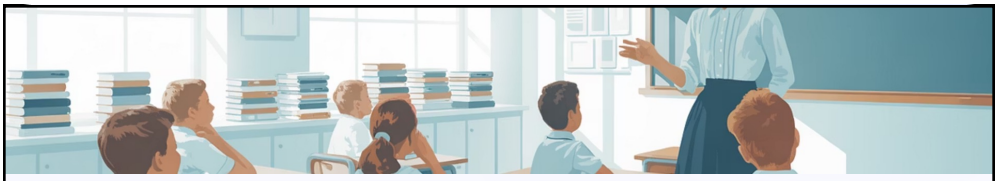

## The Birth of Instructional Level Theory

A major issue of 19th century educators was to get students to attend school.

This led to school textbook reforms: increases in selections aimed at children's interests, the addition of illustrations, and smoothing, and extending and making more gradual the introduction of difficulty through grade leveled books.

Much of the century was spent developing reading curricula based on gradually more difficulty levels of books.

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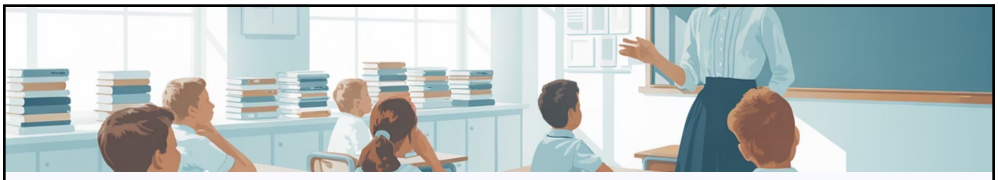

## The Birth of Instructional Level Theory (cont.)

By the end of the 19th century attracting students to schools was no longer a problem - because of child labor laws, compulsory education laws, and urban growth.

Classes were large and it became apparent that despite the separation of age levels by grades, there was a great deal of variation in reading performance within any classroom.

Early 20th century survey revealed that 58% of teachers divided their classes into smaller reading groups and 42% were varying the book grades.

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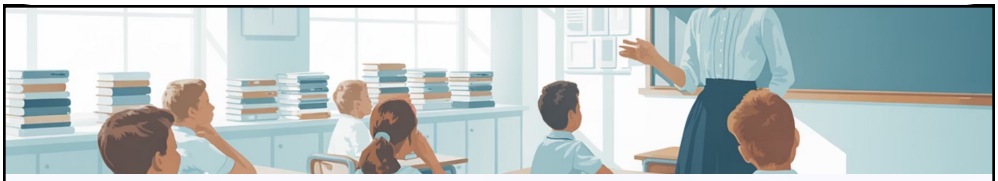

## The Birth of Instructional Level Theory (cont.)

From 1915-1945, there was great interest in identifying successful ways to differentiate instruction for diverse learners. In all cases, they were based on schemes aimed at placing kids in different text levels (curricular differentiation).

Emmett Betts proposed that every student has three distinct reading levels, each requiring different instructional approaches. This theory promised to solve the challenge of meeting individual student needs through precise text matching.

The appeal was obvious: if teachers could simply match students to appropriately leveled texts, learning would naturally follow. This seemingly logical approach quickly spread throughout American education.

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# Betts' Three Reading Levels

### Independent Level

Texts easy enough for students to read successfully on their own without any assistance or support.

### Instructional Level

Texts that pose a modest level of challenge that can easily be overcome with minimal teacher support.

### Frustration Level

Texts considered too difficult to comprehend even with quality teaching and substantial support.

- Independent Level: 99-100% accuracy; 90-100% comprehension
- Instructional Level: 95-98% accuracy; 75-90% comprehension
- Frustration Level: 0-92% accuracy; 0-50% comprehension

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# Later Modifications to the Theory

1. **Edward Gickling (Special Education)**
   Suggested 93-97% word reading accuracy for instructional level, focusing on special needs students.
2. **Marie Clay (Reading Recovery)**
   Proposed 90% accuracy for Reading Recovery interventions, lowering the bar significantly.
3. **Fountas and Pinnell**
   Extended Clay's 90% criterion to general Tier 1 classroom teaching, influencing mainstream instruction.

Despite these variations, the underlying theory remained constant: match students to appropriate texts and learning will improve. None of these modifications provided evidence supporting their effectiveness.

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## The Problem with Instructional Level Theory

All versions of instructional level theory share the same fundamental assumption: appropriate text matching leads to accelerated learning. However, they all provide **curriculum differentiation** rather than **instructional differentiation**.

The difference is crucial. Curriculum differentiation emphasizes different content, while instructional differentiation provides different types and amounts of support to help all students access challenging content.

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## Some Research Findings

**Killgallon (1942)**

Only examined the relationship between oral reading fluency and comprehension – didn't study learning outcomes.

**Powell (1968)**

Used similar methodology but found different results – multiple instructional levels, and accuracy in the low-to-mid 80%s.

**Dunkeld (1981)**

Students taught at frustration level made the *greatest learning gains*– contradicting the theory.

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## Some Research Findings (cont.)

**Jorgensen, et al., (1977)**
Found no relationship between text level placement and achievement gains in reading.

**Morgan, et al., (2000)**
Frustration level placements led to greater learning.

**Brown, et al., (2017)**
Replicated Morgan's results.

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## More of this Research

**Kuhn et al (2006)**
Grade level placement with FORI instruction proved more effective than reading level placements of Guided Reading approaches.

**Homan, et al. (2010)**
Teaching 6th graders with instructional level text provided no advantage over using text one year above instructional level.

**Lupo, et al. (2019)**
Grade level text led to equal learning compared to easier texts with 9th graders when proper instructional support was provided.

**Burns (2025)**
Meta-analysis showed some benefits for instructional level in fluency instruction but suffered from serious methodological problems including selectivity bias and inappropriate statistical methods.

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## Special Populations and Scaffolding Studies

**O'Connor et al (2002)**

Found benefits only for learning disabled students reading at first grade reading level or lower.

**O'Connor et al (2010)**

Benefits disappeared when scaffolding was equated across difficulty levels–instruction quality mattered more than text level.

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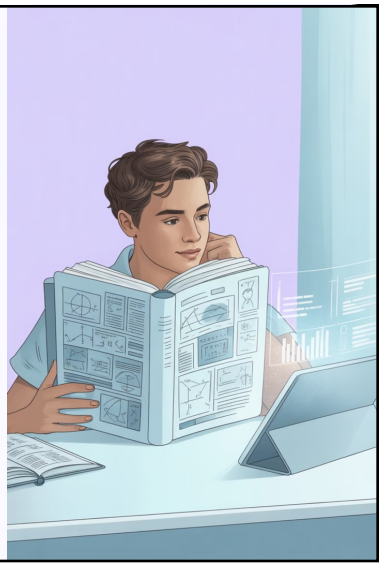
## Research Summary

No clear learning advantages from placing students at their instructional levels. When instruction was properly tailored to support more difficult texts, **substantial learning advantages appeared**–even for students with learning disabilities.



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# Why Instructional Level Theory Fails

For instructional level approaches to work effectively, three critical mechanisms must function properly:

### Accurate Assessment

Tools like (IRIs, Running Records, CBMs) must provide precise estimates of students' reading levels.

### Reliable Text Leveling

Readability and leveling systems must accurately estimate text difficulty levels.

### Effective Differentiation

Small group instruction with different text levels must accelerate student learning.

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# The Three-Fold Failure

### Assessment Problems

Standard errors of measurement in reading assessments are wider than the criteria they aim to identify, making precise level determination impossible.

### Text Leveling Issues

Leveling systems suffer from significant reliability problems and text variation within supposed levels.

### Grouping Drawbacks

Small group instruction typically reduces total teaching time and tends to segregate classrooms, with particularly negative effects on minority students.

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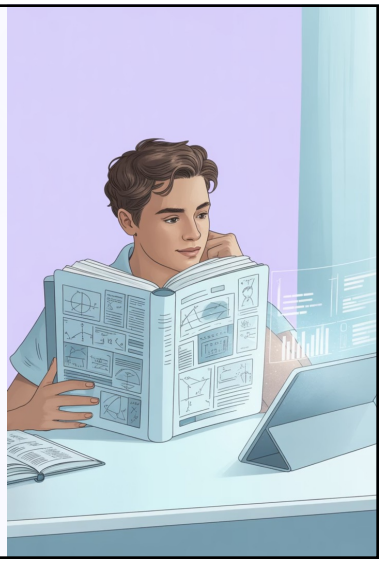
# Why We Fail

- Testing lacks the precision needed to accurately determine students' reading levels.
- Readability measures vary too much across texts to ensure students are consistently reading materials that are appropriately challenging.
- Small group instruction necessitates considerable reductions in overall instructional time for students.
- The concept of instructional level is overly simplistic and mechanical, limiting its effectiveness.
- The approach views learning solely as a product of students' interactions with text, neglecting the crucial role teachers play in supporting and guiding those interactions.
- The approach places severe limitations on what it is that students will be able to learn from any given text.



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# Benefits of Grade Level Text Instruction

**Expanded Learning Opportunities**

Students encounter content and language better aligned with their age, interests, and developmental needs.

**Graduation Readiness**

Increases the likelihood that students will develop reading skills sufficient for high school completion and beyond.

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## Research on Teaching with Challenging Text

The following studies intentionally taught students with frustration level texts while providing scaffolded support. The key insight: **instructional support transformed frustration level texts into instructional level experiences**.

Rather than changing the text difficulty, these researchers changed the *instructional approach*, proving that proper support enables students to succeed with challenging materials.

This research demonstrates that text difficulty is not fixed–it's malleable based on the quality and type of instructional support provided.

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## Supporting Studies

- Bonfiglio, Daly, Persampieri, & Andersen, 2006
- Burns, 2007
- Burns, Dean, & Foley, 2004
- Carney, Anderson, Blackburn, & Blessings, 1984
- Daly & Martens, 1994
- Eckert, Ardoin, Daisey, & Scarola, 2000
- Faulkner & Levy, 1999
- Gickling & Armstrong, 1978
- Hall, Sabey, & McClellan, 2005
- Levy, Nicholls, & Kohen, 1993
- McComas, Wacker, & Cooper, 1996
- Neill, 1979
- O'Shea, Sindelar, & O'Shea, 1985
- Pany & McCoy, 1988
- Rasinski, 1990
- Reitsma, 1988
- Rose & Beattie, 1986
- Sanford & Horner, 2013
- Sindelar, Monda, & O'Shea, 1990
- Smith, 1979
- Stoddard, Valcante, Sindelar, O'Shea, et al., 1993
- Taylor, Wade, & Yekovich, 1985
- Turpie & Paratore, 1995
- VanWagenen, Williams, & McLaughlin, 1994
- Weinstein & Cooke, 1992
- Wixson, 1986

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## Scaffolding Framework for Complex Texts

### Text Features to Support

- Complexity of ideas and content
- Match between text and reader prior knowledge
- Vocabulary complexity and density
- Syntactic complexity and structure
- Coherence and text connections
- Familiarity with genre demands
- Text organization patterns
- Subtlety of author's tone
- Sophistication of literary or data-presentation devices

### Additional Support Approaches

- Build sufficient fluency first
- Use stair-step or apprentice texts
- Teach comprehension strategies explicitly
- Enhance student motivation

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## Addressing Word Reading Problems

Even students with fundamental decoding skills may struggle with the vocabulary demands in complex texts. This creates a barrier that teachers can systematically address.

Students should receive **ongoing word instruction** that includes advanced decoding skills, spelling patterns, and morphological awareness. This provides the foundation for tackling sophisticated vocabulary.

*Preteaching selected words* prior to reading can significantly increase student success with challenging texts. The key is choosing words that are essential for comprehension rather than teaching every unfamiliar word.

Focus on words that appear frequently, carry important concepts, or represent academic language that students will encounter across texts.

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# Building Text Reading Fluency First

Students can benefit significantly from **oral reading practice prior to** focusing on comprehension. This approach builds confidence and automaticity before tackling meaning-making demands.

For some students, it makes strategic sense to start with fluency work rather than ending with it. Let's increase fluency with a text first, then focus on comprehension–this sequence can be particularly powerful.

Effective fluency practices include repeated reading, echo reading, paired reading, and reading while listening. Avoid round-robin reading, which provides insufficient practice and can embarrass struggling readers.

Text parsing–breaking complex sentences into meaningful phrases–can also support both fluency and comprehension development.

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# Example: Unparsed Text

> Sunbeams are flickering over the landscape as the sun rises. A kit fox heads for her den as another day in the desert begins.
>
> Deserts are surrounded by other kinds of landscapes. Scientists call these different land zones biomes. All the plants and animals in a biome form a community. In that community, every living thing depends on other community members for its survival. A biome's climate, soil, plants, and animals are all connected this way.

This passage from "A Walk in the Desert" contains complex sentence structures that can challenge student fluency and comprehension. Notice the multiple clauses and embedded information.

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## Example: Parsed Text

> Sunbeams/ are flickering/ over the landscape/ as the sun rises./ A kit fox/ heads/ for her den/ as another day/ in the desert/ begins./
>
> Deserts/ are surrounded/ by other kinds of landscapes./ Scientists/ call/ these different land zones/ biomes. All the plants and animals/ in a biome/ form/ a community./ In that community,/ every living thing/ depends/ on other community members/ for its survival./ A biome's climate, soil, plants, and animals/ are all connected/ this way./

Parsing helps students recognize meaningful phrase boundaries, improving both fluency and comprehension. The forward slashes indicate natural pause points that support phrasing and meaning-making.

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## Activating and Building Prior Knowledge

Reading comprehension depends heavily on **prior knowledge**–the less students know about a text's topic, the more challenging it will seem regardless of its technical reading level.

Teachers can prepare students by helping them access relevant background knowledge they already possess. Often students know more than they realize but need help making connections.

When students lack sufficient background knowledge, teachers can provide essential information *without revealing the text's specific content*. The goal is building conceptual foundations, not spoiling the reading experience.

Another powerful approach involves using multiple texts on the same topic, allowing students to build knowledge incrementally across readings.

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## Stair-Step Text Sets Strategy

### Foundation Text

Start with an accessible text that introduces key concepts and vocabulary in a manageable format.

### Building Text

Use a moderately challenging text that reinforces and expands on the foundation knowledge.

### Target Text

Tackle the complex, grade-level text with students now equipped with essential background knowledge.

The overlap in important information across texts increases the likelihood that students will notice and retain key concepts. This approach scaffolds complexity while maintaining high expectations.

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## Strategic Vocabulary Instruction

Text complexity often stems from unfamiliar vocabulary. However, we must distinguish between **academic vocabulary** (words useful across texts) and **key vocabulary** specific to a particular text.

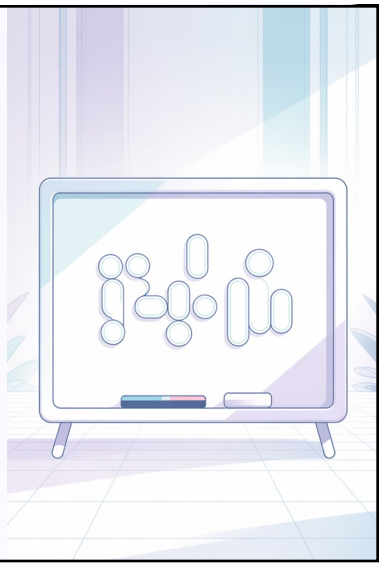
### Building a Lexicon

Long-term vocabulary development through systematic instruction across multiple contexts and texts.

### Enabling Text Understanding

Immediate support for comprehending specific texts through strategic word selection and preteaching.

Our focus today is primarily on the second goal. *Preteaching carefully selected vocabulary* can dramatically improve students' success with challenging texts when words are chosen strategically.



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## Vocabulary Selection Example

> Photosynthesis may sound like a big word, but it's actually pretty simple. You can divide it into two parts: "Photo" is the Greek word for "Light," and "synthesis," is the Greek word for "putting together," which explains what photosynthesis is. It is using light to put things together. You may have noticed that all animals and humans eat food, but plants don't eat anything. Photosynthesis is how plants eat. They use this process to make their own food. Since they don't have to move around to find food, plants stay in one place, since they can make their food anywhere as long as they have three things.

Which words would you preteach from this passage? Consider words that are essential for comprehension versus those the text explains.

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## Vocabulary Analysis

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The text defines "photosynthesis" extensively, so preteaching may be unnecessary. However, "process" (highlighted in yellow) carries important meaning but receives less explanation–making it a better candidate for preteaching.

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## Another Vocabulary Challenge

> Some scientists argued that these gases have heated up our atmosphere. They say global warming will affect our climate so dramatically that glaciers will melt and sea levels will rise. In addition, it is not just our atmosphere that can be polluted. Oil from spills often seeps into the ocean.

Which words would you select for preteaching from this environmental science passage?

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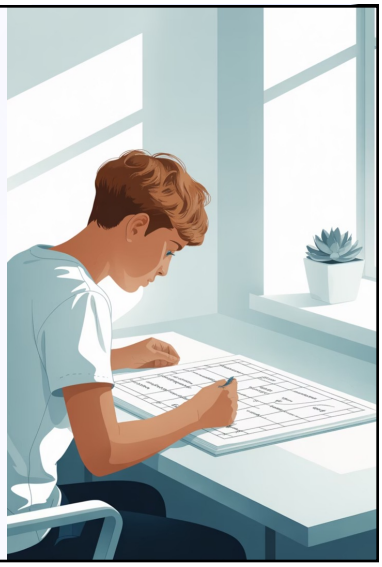
## Comprehending Complex Sentences

Reading comprehension requires more than understanding individual word meanings. Students must also navigate **syntactic complexity**–the way sentences are structured and organized.

While formal grammar instruction has limited impact on comprehension, teachers can successfully address syntax through applied approaches that focus on meaning-making.

*Identify potentially difficult sentences and prepare strategic questions* aimed at revealing comprehension problems. This approach helps students parse complex structures while maintaining focus on meaning.



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## Sentence Example

*"However, on August 24, 2006, the International Astronomical Union (IAU), a group of individual astronomers and astronomical societies from around the world, made an announcement.*

*--25 words*
*--5 commas*

This sentence contains multiple embedded elements that can confuse readers about the main subject and action. Strategic parsing can help students identify the core message.

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## Sentence Example (cont.)

*However,*
*on August 24, 2006,*
*the International Astronomical Union (IAU), a group of individual astronomers and astronomical societies from around the world*
*made*
*an announcement*

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## Sentence Example (cont.)

*Who was the sentence about?*
*the International Astronomical Union (IAU)*

*Who are they?*
*a group of individual astronomers and astronomical societies from around the world*

*What did they do?*
*made*

*Made what?*
*an announcement*

*When?*
*on August 24, 2006*

43

## Another Complex Sentence Example

> "The women of Montgomery, both young and older, would come in with their fancy holiday dresses that needed adjustments or their Sunday suits and blouses that needed just a touch—a flower or some velvet trimming or something to make the ladies look festive."
>
> –Nikki Giovanni (Rosa)

--44 words
--3 punctuation marks (2 commas, 1 em-dash)

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## Another Complex Sentence Example (cont.)

> "The women of Montgomery, ~~both young and older,~~ would come in with their fancy holiday dresses that needed adjustments or their Sunday suits and blouses that needed just a touch—a flower or some velvet trimming or something to make the ladies look festive."

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## Another Complex Sentence Example (cont.)

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## Identifying Challenging Sentence Patterns

**Length Indicators**

Particularly long sentences that exceed typical processing capacity

**Internal Punctuation**

Multiple commas, semicolons, colons, or dashes signaling complex structures

**Embedded Elements**

Dependent clauses, multiple phrases, parentheticals, or passive voice constructions

Write strategic questions that reveal student comprehension of these challenging sentence structures, then teach students to break sentences down systematically.

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## Supporting Text Cohesion Understanding

Texts become challenging when the **relationships and connections** between ideas remain unclear to readers.

- The killer whale tosses the penguin into the air and generally torments its prey before it eats it.
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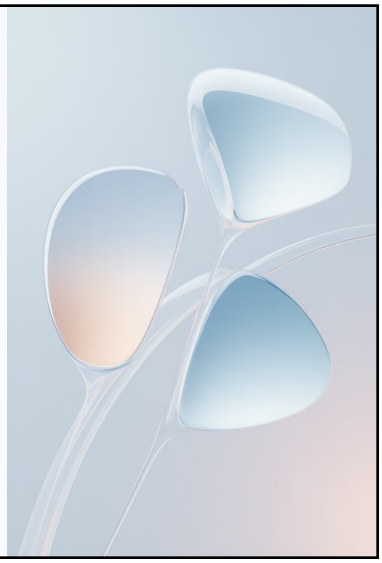

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## Cohesion Example

> Meanwhile, the nebula continued to orbit the new Sun until it formed a large flat ring around it. Scientists call this ring a "protoplanetary disk." The disk, or ring, was hottest where it was closest to the Sun, and coolest at its outer edge. As the disk swirled around the Sun, the Sun's gravity went to work. It pulled and tugged at the bits of rock, dust, ice, and gas until they came together in clumps of material we now call the planets.

52

## Cohesion Example (cont.)

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56

There were several roads near by, but it did not take her long to find the one paved with yellow bricks.

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‘They all can,’ said the Duchess; ‘and most of ‘em do.’
‘I don’t know of any that do,’ Alice said very politely, feeling quite pleased to have got into a conversation.

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‘I don’t know of any that do,’ Alice said very politely, feeling quite pleased to have got into a conversation.

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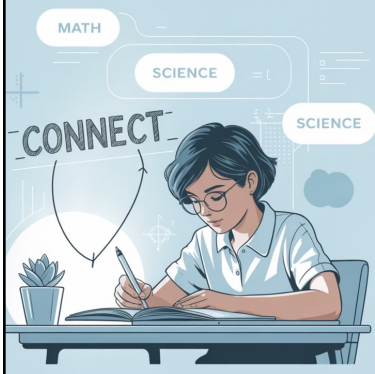
67




## Teaching Students to Map Cohesion

Help students develop systematic approaches to tracking cohesive ties:

- → **Identify Key Nouns**
  Circle or highlight the main concepts and entities in each paragraph
- → **Track Pronouns**
  Draw lines connecting pronouns to their antecedents
- → **Note Synonyms**
  Mark different terms that refer to the same concept
- → **Map Relationships**
  Identify cause-effect, sequence, and comparison connections

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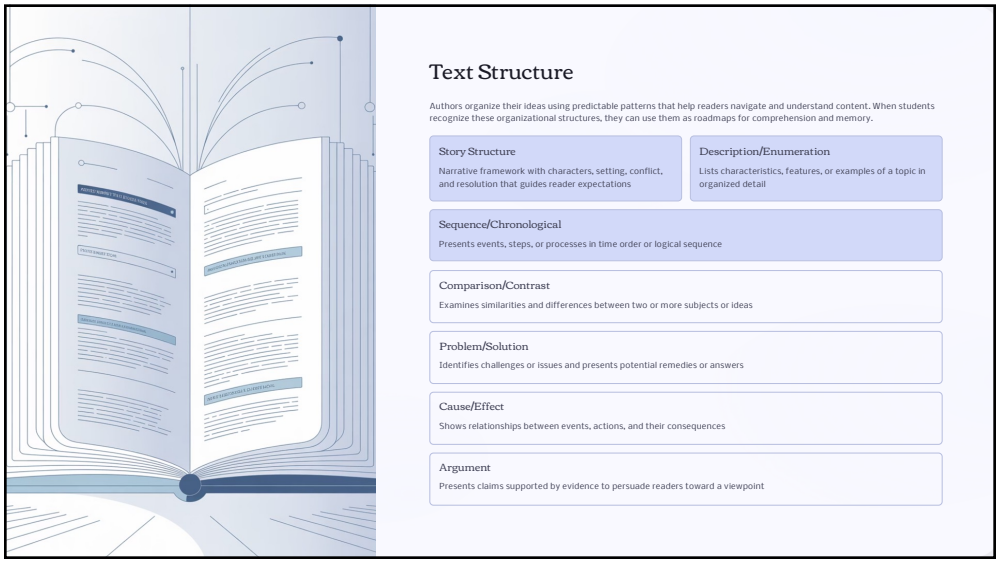
Text Structure
Authors organize their ideas using predictable patterns that help readers navigate and understand content. When students recognize these organizational structures, they can use them as roadmaps for comprehension and memory.
Story Structure
Narrative framework with characters, setting, conflict, and resolution that guides reader expectations
Description/Enumeration
Lists characteristics, features, or examples of a topic in organized detail
Sequence/Chronological
Presents events, steps, or processes in time order or logical sequence
Comparison/Contrast
Examines similarities and differences between two or more subjects or ideas
Problem/Solution
Identifies challenges or issues and presents potential remedies or answers
Cause/Effect
Shows relationships between events, actions, and their consequences
Argument
Presents claims supported by evidence to persuade readers toward a viewpoint

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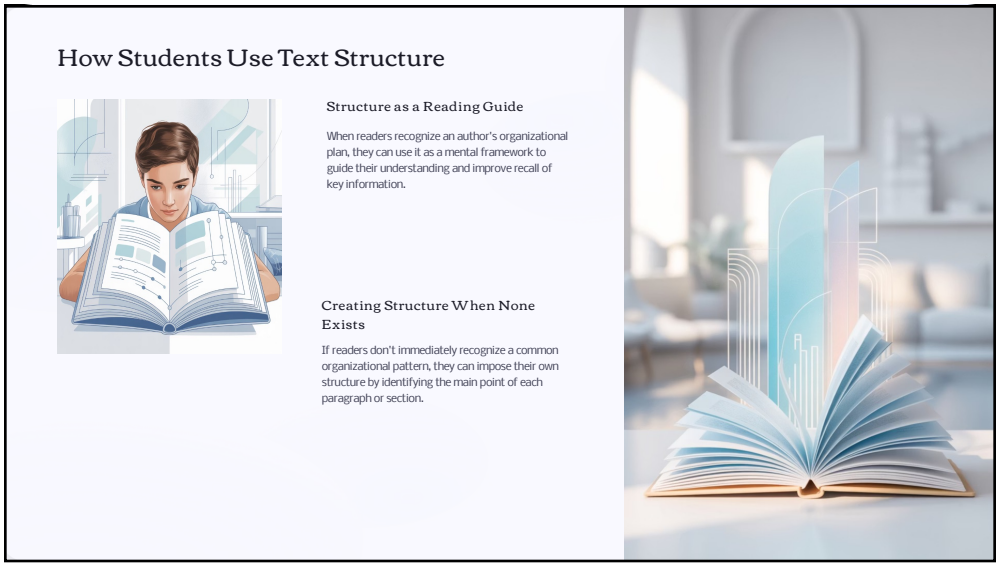
How Students Use Text Structure
Structure as a Reading Guide
When readers recognize an author's organizational plan, they can use it as a mental framework to guide their understanding and improve recall of key information.
Creating Structure When None Exists
If readers don't immediately recognize a common organizational pattern, they can impose their own structure by identifying the main point of each paragraph or section.

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## Comprehension Strategies That Work

> Research shows that when students are active readers–that is, when they are actively trying to understand a text–they comprehend and remember more.

Comprehension strategies are research-proven methods that get students thinking deeply about the ideas in a text. These active reading approaches transform passive consumers into engaged thinkers who interact meaningfully with content.

### Summarization

Students distill main ideas and key details, requiring them to identify what's most important and synthesize information effectively.

### Questioning

Students generate questions before, during, and after reading to maintain engagement and clarify understanding.

### Monitoring

Students track their own comprehension, recognizing when understanding breaks down and applying fix-up strategies.

### Information Seeking

Students actively search for particular kinds of information, making their reading purposeful and focused.

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## Repetition

> One of the most powerful scaffolds is also one of the most obvious—reading a text more than once makes it more accessible

> In the past, we tended to have students read a text a single time, but as the text challenge increases it is essential that we encourage students to read texts (and parts of texts) more than once to make sense of it

> This is an effective strategy, but it is expensive too (the idea is to become successful with these texts—which should make it possible to succeed with other texts later with less work)

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# Motivation Through Challenge

The traditional instructional level approach assumes students avoid challenging work, but research reveals the opposite: students actually seek challenge and are motivated by it when properly supported.

### Challenge Motivates

Students are energized by appropriately challenging tasks that stretch their abilities without overwhelming them

### Growth Mindset

Challenge works when students see the possibility of improvement and understand they can get stronger

### Transparency Builds Trust

Don't hide the challenge–tell students what's happening and show them your plan for their success

> Research shows that students are interested in more challenging content and will independently work through difficult text to access engaging ideas. Using challenging texts opens up exciting content possibilities.

**Teaching Takeaway:** Embrace challenging texts as gateways to richer content and deeper engagement. When students understand the purpose and see your support system, they rise to meet higher expectations.

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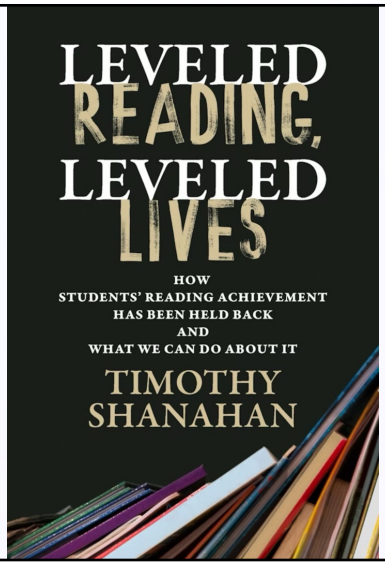


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