Teaching Reading with Complex Text Across the Grades

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New Research-Based Approaches

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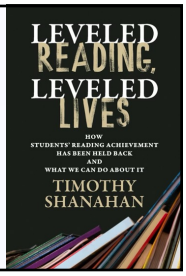
This presentation explores groundbreaking research that challenges traditional approaches to reading comprehension instruction. We'll examine evidence-based methods for using complex texts to accelerate student learning rather than limiting it through text leveling.



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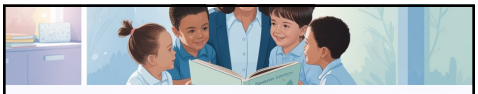

Reading is Developmental

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

This doesn't mean limiting their exposure to rich language and complex ideas. *Expose young students to sophisticated content and language through read-alouds.*

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

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Two Approaches to Comprehension Instruction

Directed or Guided Reading
Communal reading of a complete text with teacher guidance throughout the process. Students experience the full text while receiving strategic support and answering questions.

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.

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The Dominance of Leveled Reading

Leveled reading is 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.

Most comprehension instruction consists of having students read relatively easy books and answer specific types of questions.

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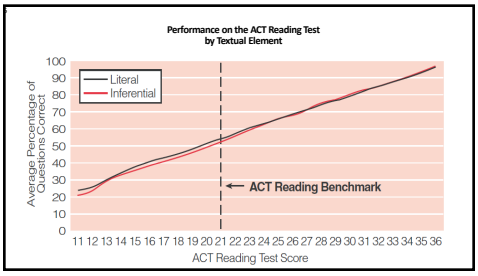

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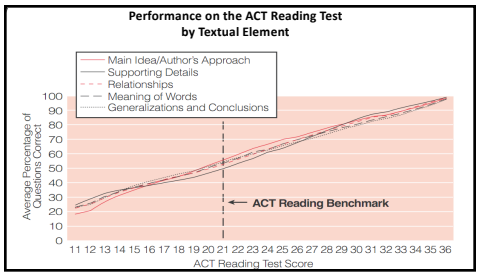
Performance on the ACT Reading Test
by Textual Element
Main Idea/Author's Approach
Supporting Details
Relationships
Meaning of Words
Generalizations and Conclusions
Average Percentage of Questions Correct
100
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
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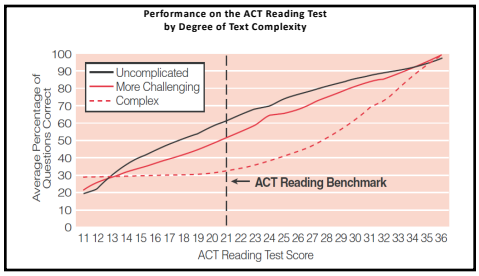
ACT Reading Benchmark
11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36
ACT Reading Test Score

7


Performance on the ACT Reading Test
by Degree of Text Complexity
Uncomplicated
More Challenging
Complex
Average Percentage of Questions Correct
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ACT Reading Benchmark
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ACT Reading Test Score

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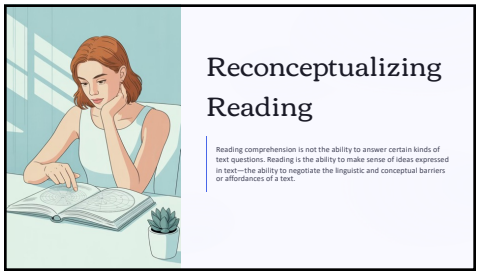
Reconceptualizing Reading
Reading comprehension is not the ability to answer certain kinds of text questions. Reading is the ability to make sense of ideas expressed in text—the ability to negotiate the linguistic and conceptual barriers or affordances of a text.

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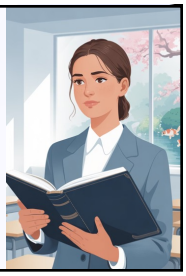
Four Common Classroom Responses to Text Complexity

1. **Avoid complex texts entirely**
   Use only texts students can read reasonably well.
2. **Telling students what the text says**
   Make the text irrelevant by giving them the information.
3. **Reading the text to the students**
   Translating reading instruction into listening practice.
4. **Ignoring text complexity**
   Little is done if the students can't understand the text



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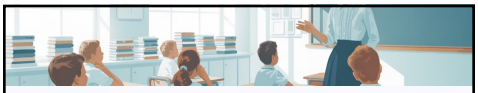

The Birth of Instructional Level Theory

Researchers and school districts desperately sought successful ways to differentiate instruction for diverse learners.

Emmett Betts (1946) 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's 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.

Betts believed that successful instruction required students to comprehend texts with minimal difficulty, making text challenge something to be avoided rather than embraced.

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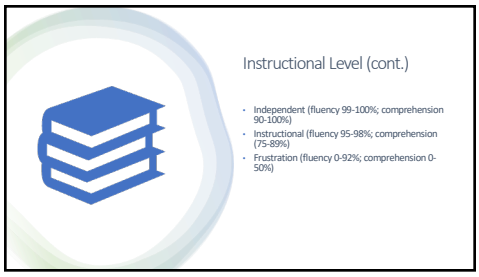
Instructional Level (cont.)
Independent (fluency 99-100%; comprehension 90-100%)
Instructional (fluency 95-98%; comprehension (75-89%)
Frustration (fluency 0-92%; comprehension 0-50%)

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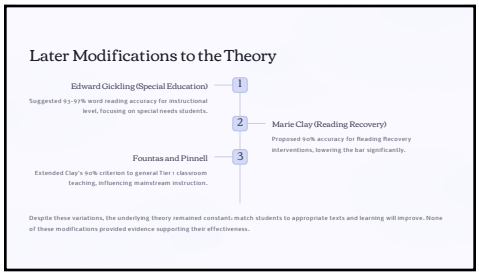
Later Modifications to the Theory
Edward Gickling (Special Education)
Suggested 93-97% word reading accuracy for instructional level, focusing on special needs students.
1
2
Marie Clay (Reading Recovery)
Proposed 90% accuracy for Reading Recovery interventions, lowering the bar significantly.
Fountas and Pinnell
Extended Clay's 90% criterion to general Tier 1 classroom teaching, influencing mainstream instruction.
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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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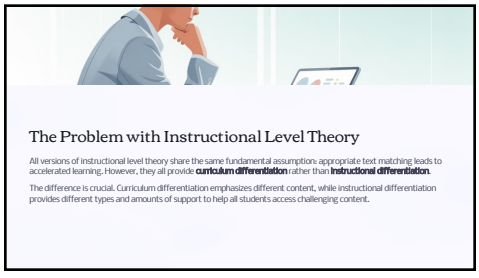
The Problem with Instructional Level Theory
All versions of instructional level theory share the same fundamental assumption: appropriate text matching leads to accelerated learning. However, they all provide curriculum differentiation rather than instructional differentiation.
The difference is crucial. 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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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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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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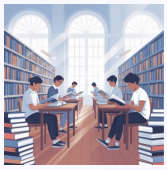
More Research

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

Homan, et al. (2080)
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.



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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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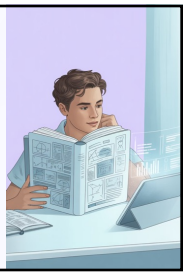
Research Summary

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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Other Research on Teaching with Challenging Text

- Reading comprehension instruction usually focuses on the comprehension questions rather than the text. Big mistake!
- Short-term studies have shown that it is possible to scaffold success in reading "frustration level" texts
- Schools that avoid teaching English and math at students' levels have been more successful in raising reading achievement (TNTP, 2024)

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Targeted Studies

Targeted studies show that with scaffolds students can learn from frustration level texts.

- Bonfiglio, Daly, Persampieri, & Andersen, 2006
- Burns, 2007
- Burns, Dean, & Foley, 2004
- Carney, Anderson, Blackburn, & Blessings, 1984
- Daly & Martens, 1994
- Eckert, Ardoin, Daney, & 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
- Winson, 1986

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Policy Effects

TNTP Study
- 28,000 elementary & middle schools where kids start out below grade level
- About 5% of these schools (~1,300 schools) raise achievement (1.3 years growth for each year of schooling, which catches kids up to grade level)
- The only academic commonality among these schools that distinguishes them from the rest is that they teach English and Math at grade level rather than reducing the curriculum to the students' low performance levels each year

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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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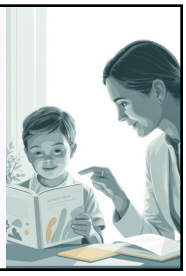
Building Text Reading Fluency First

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.

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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./

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Addressing Word Reading Problems

Even students with fundamental decoding skills may struggle to in complex texts.

Students should receive **ongoing word instruction** that includes decoding guidance, emphasis on spelling patterns, and building sight vocabulary.

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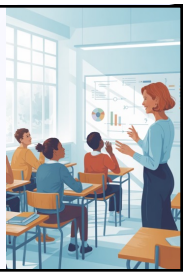
Activating and Building Prior Knowledge

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.

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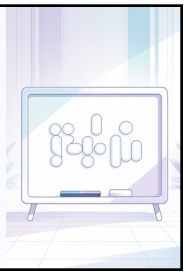
Strategic Vocabulary Instruction

Text complexity often stems from unfamiliar vocabulary.

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 Analysis

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.

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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 passage?

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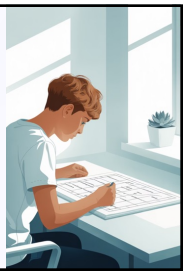
Comprehending Complex Sentences

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

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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

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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 would come in with their fancy holiday dresses that needed adjustments
or The women of Montgomery would come in with 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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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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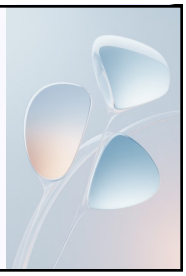
Supporting Text Cohesion Understanding

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.*
- *The killer whale tosses the penguin into the air and generally torments the penguin before eating it.*



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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.

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Cohesion Example (cont.)

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.

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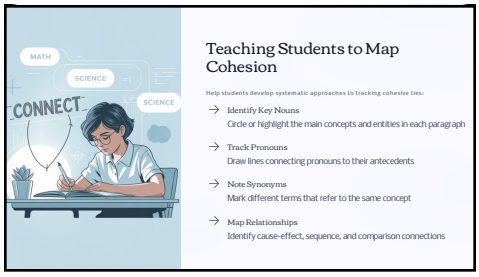
MATH
SCIENCE
CONNECT
SCIENCE
Teaching Students to Map Cohesion
Help students develop systematic approaches to tracking cohesive ties.
Identify Key Nouns
Circle or highlight the main concepts and entities in each paragraph
Track Pronouns
Draw lines connecting pronouns to their antecedents
Note Synonyms
Mark different terms that refer to the same concept
Map Relationships
Identify cause-effect, sequence, and comparison connections

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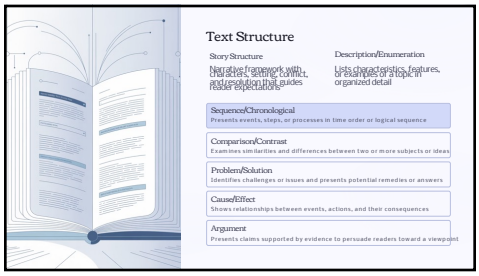
Text Structure
Story Structure
Narrative framework with characters, setting, conflict, and resolution that guides reader expectations
Description/Enumeration
Lists characteristics, features, or examples of a topic in organized detail
Sequence/Chronological
Presents events, steps, or processes in time 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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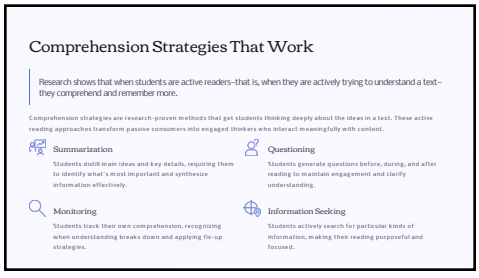
Comprehension Strategies That Work
Research shows that when students are active readers–that is, when they are actively trying to understand a text–they comprehend and remember more.
Comprehension strategies are research-proven methods that get students thinking deeply about the ideas in a text. These 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

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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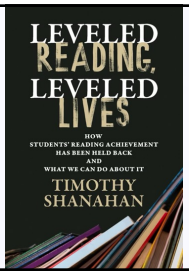

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