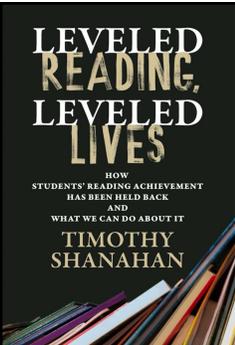


Teaching Reading in Grades 6-12

Timothy Shanahan
University of Illinois at Chicago



1



New Research-Based Approaches

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.

2

Secondary Reading Instruction

- English classes
- Responsibility for teaching language, literature, and literacy
- Texts chosen more because of their cultural and content value than as avenues to reading improvement
- Disciplinary skills, strategies, abilities

3

Interrelated Strands

- Literacy is learned through a combination of explicit teaching and guided practice
- Since we're dealing with advanced literacy levels, the primary focus need be on the texts and how to read literature as opposed to how to read
- Much instruction should take the form of directed reading experiences focused on valuable texts (literature) with writing in response to the texts
- Use of explicit teaching to reinforce "raised issues"

4

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



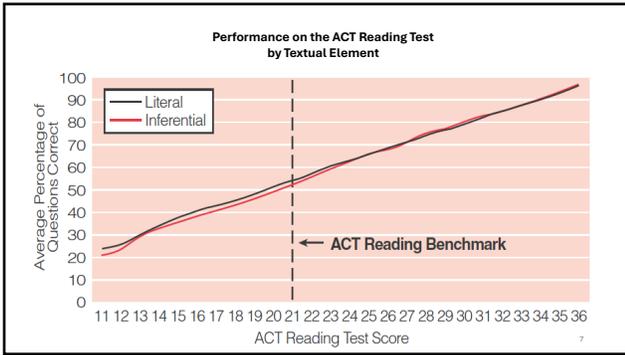
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A Solution to this Problem

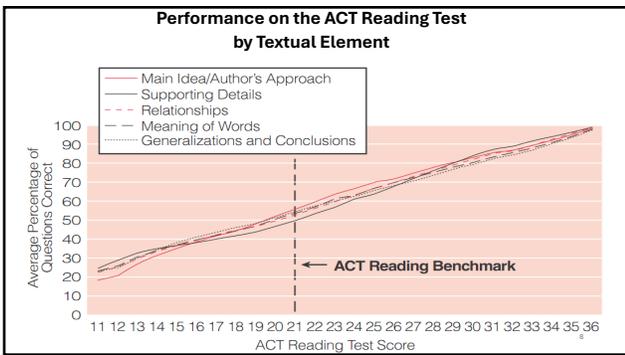
- Instead of avoiding the difficulties of text, we need to teach students how to surmount these difficulties (that's what "teaching reading" means at these levels)
- Students need to gain the content of the texts through their own reading efforts
- Teachers need to scaffold this reading so that students are successful – but without reading the texts to them and without telling them what the texts say



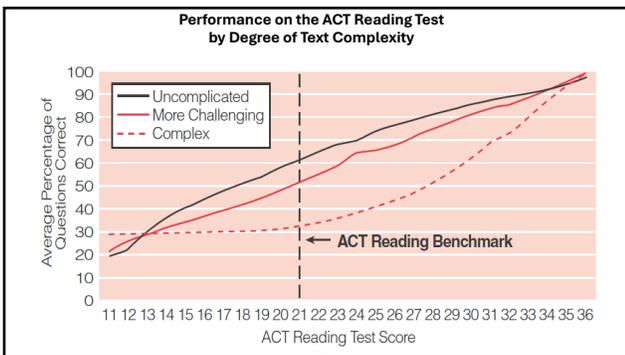
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7



8



9



Reconceptualizing Reading

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.

10

Today's Presentation

- Our focus is on how to scaffold the reading of challenging text

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Research

Instructional level (or easy) text placements don't improve literacy growth – students do no better and often worse when taught at the instructional level

Dunkeld, 1981
 Jorgensen, et al., 1977
 Morgan, et al., 2000
 Brown, et al., 2017
 Kuhn, et al., 2006
 Homan, et al., 2010
 Lupo, et al., 2019
 O'Connor, et al., 2002
 O'Connor, et al., 2010
 TNTP, 2024



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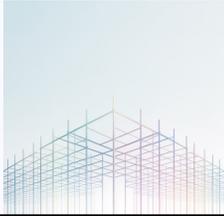
Other Research on Teaching with Challenging Text

- 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)



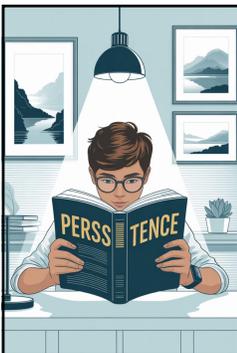
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Scaffolding Framework for Complex Texts

<p>Text Features to Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 	<p>Additional Support Approaches</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 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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My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant **tongue** could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So, I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip.

I give Pirrip as my father's family name, on the **authority** of his tombstone and my sister - Mrs. Joe Gargery, who married the blacksmith. As I never saw my father or my mother, and never saw any **likeness** of either of them (for their days were long before the days of photographs), my first fancies regarding what they were like, were **unreasonably** derived from their tombstones. The shape of the letters on my father's, gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair. From the character and turn of the inscription, "Also Georgiana Wife of the Above," I drew a childish conclusion that my mother was freckled and sickly. To five little stone **lozenges**, each about a foot and a half long, which were arranged in a neat row beside their grave, and were sacred to the memory of five little brothers of mine - who gave up trying to get a living, **exceedingly** early in that universal struggle - I am **indebted** for a belief I religiously entertained that they had all been born on their backs with their hands in their **trousers**-pockets, and had never taken them out in this state of existence.

Great Expectations by Charles Dickens

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Word Reading Example

- Tongue
- Likeness
- Unreasonably
- Lozenge
- Exceedingly
- Trousers
- Indebted

17

Word Reading Example

- Tongue
- Au-thor-i-ty
- Like/ness
- Un/rea/son/a/bly
- Loz/enge
- Ex/ceed/ing/ly
- Trou/sers
- In/debt/ed

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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

I am by birth a Genevese, and my family is one of the most distinguished of that republic. My ancestors had been for many years counsellors and syndics, and my father had filled several public situations with honour and reputation. He was respected by all who knew him for his integrity and indefatigable attention to public business. He passed his younger days perpetually occupied by the affairs of his country; a variety of circumstances had prevented his marrying early, nor was it until the decline of life that he became a husband and the father of a family.

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Example: Unparsed Text (cont.)

I/ am /by birth/ a Genevese,/ and my family/ is/ one of the most distinguished /of that republic./
My ancestors/ had been/ for many years/ counsellors and syndics,/ and my father/ had filled/
several public situations/ with honour and reputation./ He/ was respected/ by all who knew him/
for his integrity and indefatigable attention/ to public business./ He/ passed/ his younger days/
perpetually occupied/ by the affairs/ of his country;/ a variety/ of circumstances/ had prevented/
his marrying early,/ nor was it /until the decline of life/ that he/ became/ a husband/ and the
father/ of a family./

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Parsing Support

- Start with parsed text – students read these orally and/or silently
- Students, working in partners, parse text – figuring it out by trying to read it to each other to figure out where the slashes go
- Students try to read unparsed text as if it were parsed, parsing on the fly

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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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Thoughts on Prior Knowledge Activation and Building

1. Only deal with prior knowledge if it is likely to raise a comprehension problem.
2. Don't overdo it – be economical, tell students "we're going to read a story about two people who want to do something for each other."
3. Respect the reader-text relationship. Don't present information that's the author will present. If you tell it, they don't have to figure it out.
4. Fill students in on context or other background information the author assumed (e.g., "Julius Caesar").
5. Excerpts are special. They may alter author expectations.
6. Culturally different students may benefit from a different prior knowledge input.
7. Use multiple texts to solve the prior-knowledge problems.
8. Prior knowledge issues can be addressed during and after reading, the explanation.

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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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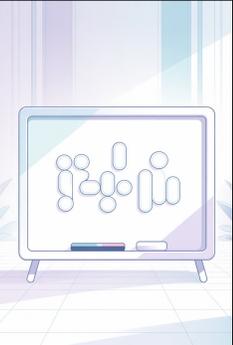
Strategic Vocabulary Instruction

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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Which Vocabulary To Teach?

Miep has so much to carry she looks like a pack mule. She goes out nearly every day in search of vegetables, and then cycles back with her purchases in large shopping bags. She's also the one who brings five library books with her every Saturday. We long for Saturdays because that means books. We're like a lot of little children with a present. Ordinary people don't know how much books can mean to someone who's cooped up. Our only diversions are reading, studying and listening to the wireless.

Ann Frank: Diary of a Young Girl

Would you preteach this word?

27

Importance vs. Immediate Value

I can never forget the scene that met us. Between us and the Barrier was a lane of some fifty yards wide, a seething cauldron. Bergs were calving off as we watched: and capsizing: and hitting other bergs, splitting into two and falling apart. The Killers filled the whole place. Looking downwards into a hole between our berg and the next, a hole not bigger than a small room, we saw at least six whales. They were so crowded that they could only lie so as to get their snouts out of the water and my memory is that their snouts were bottle-nosed. At this moment our berg split into two parts and we hastily retreated to the lower and safer floes.

The Worst Journey in the World

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Explicit Lessons

Context Clues 1.1 Name _____
Directions: read each sentence and determine the meaning of the word using cross sentence clues or your prior knowledge. Then, explain what clues in the sentence helped you determine the word meaning.
1. **Dignity:** Even when the police officers put the handcuffs on my mother, she maintained her **dignity**, holding her head up high as she marched off the protest site.
Definition: _____
What clues in the sentence led you to your definition? _____
2. **Splendid:** The rays from the rising sun shined **splendidly** through our kitchen window.
Definition: _____
What clues in the sentence led you to your definition? _____
3. **Particle:** John was so hungry that he didn't leave a single **particle** of the muffin on the plate.
Definition: _____
What clues in the sentence led you to your definition? _____

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One More Vocabulary Challenge

Mrs. van Daan's a fine one to talk! She sets an example all right – a bad one! She's known to be exceedingly pushy, egotistical, cunning, calculating, and perpetually dissatisfied. Add to that, vanity and coquettishness and there's no question about it: she's a thoroughly despicable person."

Would you preteach these words?

30

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.



31

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

32

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*

33

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

34

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)

35

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."

36

Another Complex Sentence Example (cont.)

The women of Montgomery 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."

37

Seven horizontal lines for writing.

Another Complex Sentence Example (cont.)

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38

Seven horizontal lines for writing.

Another Complex Sentence Example (cont.)

"The women of Montgomery would come in with their fancy holiday dresses that needed adjustments
or their Sunday suits and blouses that needed just a touch
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39

Seven horizontal lines for writing.

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."

40

Another example

"While filling out my certificate, Baba realized that he didn't know my sex for sure but that didn't matter; he'd always known I was a boy, had spoken to me as a boy while I was in Mama, and as he approached the box that contained the question, NAME OF CHILD, he wrote with a quivering hand and in his best English cursive, Nidal (strife; struggle)."

41

Another example

"While filling out my certificate, Baba realized that he didn't know my sex for sure but that didn't matter; he'd always known I was a boy, had spoken to me as a boy while I was in Mama, and as he approached the box that contained the question, NAME OF CHILD, he wrote with a quivering hand and in his best English cursive, Nidal (strife; struggle)."

- 68 words
- 7 commas or semi-colons
- parentheses
- typographic cues (caps)

42

Another example

First, I break this up just using punctuation:

“While filling out my certificate, Baba realized that he didn’t know my sex for sure but that didn’t matter; he’d always known I was a boy, had spoken to me as a boy while I was in Mama, and as he approached the box that contained the question, NAME OF CHILD, he wrote with a quivering hand and in his best English cursive, Nidal (strife; struggle).”

Seven horizontal lines for handwriting practice.

43

Another example

First I will break this up just using the punctuation:

“While filling out my certificate, Baba realized that he didn’t know my sex for sure but that didn’t matter; he’d always known I was a boy, had spoken to me as a boy while I was in Mama, and as he approached the box that contained the question, NAME OF CHILD, he wrote with a quivering hand and in his best English cursive, Nidal (strife; struggle).”

Seven horizontal lines for handwriting practice.

44

Another example

Second, I’ll find the verbs...

“While filling out my certificate, Baba realized that he didn’t know my sex for sure but that didn’t matter; he’d always known I was a boy, had spoken to me as a boy while I was in Mama, and as he approached the box that contained the question, NAME OF CHILD, he wrote with a quivering hand and in his best English cursive, Nidal (strife; struggle).”

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45

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46

Another example

Second, I'll find the verbs...and divide the multiple verbs...

"While filling out my certificate, Baba realized that he didn't know my sex for sure but that didn't matter; he'd always known I was a boy, had spoken to me as a boy while I was in Mama, and as he approached the box that contained the question, NAME OF CHILD, he wrote with a quivering hand and in his best English cursive, Nidal (strife; struggle)."

47

Another example

Third, make sure I know the subject of each verb...

"While filling out my certificate, Baba realized that he didn't know my sex for sure but that didn't matter; he'd always known I was a boy, had spoken to me as a boy while I was in Mama, and as he approached the box that contained the question, NAME OF CHILD, he wrote with a quivering hand and in his best English cursive, Nidal (strife; struggle)."

48

Another example

Third, make sure I know the subject of each verb...

"While [Baba was] **filling out** my certificate,
 Baba **realized**
 that he [Baba] **didn't know** my sex for sure
 but that [Baba didn't know my sex for sure] didn't **matter**;
 he'd [Baba had] always **known**
 I **was** a boy,
[Baba] had spoken to me as a boy
 while I **was** in Mama,
 and as he [Baba] **approached**
 the box that **contained** the question,
 NAME OF CHILD,
 he [Baba] **wrote** with a quivering hand and in his best English cursive, Nidat
 (strife; struggle)."

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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.

50

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.*



51

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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54

Cohesion Example (cont.)

Meanwhile, the nebula continued to orbit the new Sun until it formed a large flat disk around it. Scientists call this disk a protoplanetary disk. The inner edge was hottest where it was closest to the Sun, and coolest at the 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.

55

Cohesion Example (cont.)

Meanwhile, the nebula continued to orbit the new Sun until it formed a large flat disk around it. Scientists call this disk a protoplanetary disk. The inner edge was hottest where it was closest to the Sun, and coolest at the 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.

56

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

57

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

58

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

59

"Surely," said John, like one who had lost faith in his memory, "he used not to sleep in the kennel?"
"John," Wendy said falteringly, "perhaps we don't remember the old life as well as we thought we did."

60

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62

'I didn't know that Cheshire cats always grinned; in fact, I didn't know that cats could grin.'
'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.

63

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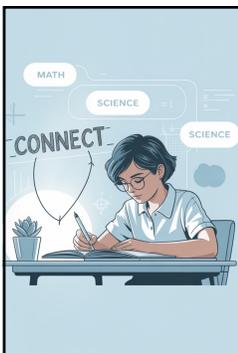
65

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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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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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Summary

- Literary text should be the main pillar of the English class
- Guided/directed reading should be the central activity
- Reading instruction should focus chiefly on scaffolding and supporting students' text reading (enabling students to read the instructional and to prepare them for future reading)
- The outcomes of these readings should be both in terms of skills or abilities and content knowledge
- Writing instruction should focus on reading in response to text (summary, analysis/critique, synthesis)

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