

# Science of Reading

## So, What's the Story? Comprehending Narrative Texts in the Early Years



### What is narrative text comprehension?

The RAND Reading Study Group (2002) indicated that reading comprehension involves three interlocking components: 1) the reader, 2) the text, and 3) the activity, nested within a broader sociocultural context. The reader is the one doing the comprehending, and the text is the reading material, whether traditional or digital. The activity refers to the comprehension task, skill, strategy, or concept the reader is attempting to perform to demonstrate their understanding of text.

Narrative texts are typically associated with literature, although some are also associated with nonfiction texts, such as biographies. Narrative texts are found in a variety of narrative or literary genres, such as fairy tales, folktales, tall tales, fables, myths, legends, fantasy, science fiction, historical fiction, mysteries, etc.

A shared characteristic of narrative texts is that they typically follow a single organizational structure called story structure. Story structure can be described by using the elements of one of several published story grammars (Mandler & Johnson, 1977; Stein & Glenn, 1979; Thorndyke, 1977; van Dijk, 1975). By definition, a grammar describes principles or rules that govern the structure of language. Thus, a story grammar describes the structure of story language. Regardless of several slight differences among these various story grammar descriptions, researchers generally agree on the following elements for describing a story grammar: 1) setting (including characters), 2) the initiating problem, 3) internal goals to solve the problem, 4) events, episodes, or attempts to solve the problem, and 5) the resolution. Developing a sense of how stories are structured helps readers predict with greater facility, store and retrieve information more efficiently, and recall story elements with increased accuracy and completeness.

# What is research-supported reading comprehension instruction and practice for teaching narrative texts?

There are several essential elements of research-supported narrative reading comprehension instruction and practice. There is significant research support dating back several decades for the influence of background knowledge on students' reading comprehension. We know, for instance, that when students possess copious background knowledge or experiences within the content of a text, this can help students comprehend text more successfully (Shanahan et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2021). Knowing this has at least two implications for practice. First, students are advantaged when they have access to a strong, coherent, knowledge-based core curriculum with the reading of complex and knowledge-rich texts, both narrative and informational (Grissmer et al., 2023; Wexler, 2020, 2021). Second, teachers need to be aware of the ABCs of background knowledge, Activate, Build, Correct, and Develop, to take full advantage of the power of using background knowledge to comprehend texts (Smith et al., 2021).

Next, we know that teaching reading comprehension strategies endows students with the capacity to work their way successfully through more complex and difficult texts (Duke et al., 2021; National Reading Panel, 2000; Willingham, 2007, 2017). The National Reading Panel (2000) found scientific support for just six cognitive comprehension strategies: 1) answering questions, 2) asking questions, 3) story structure, 4) comprehension monitoring, 5) summarizing, and 6) graphic organizers. They also noted research support for collaborative/cooperative teaching approaches and multiple strategy instruction.

Finally, there is a serious need for teachers to work from a research-supported framework for teaching reading comprehension. The best research-supported framework currently available to guide teachers' reading comprehension instruction is Construction–Integration or CI Theory (Kintsch & Kintsch, 2005).

## Teaching Narrative Text Reading Comprehension: A Framework for Guiding Instruction

Evidence-based teaching of reading comprehension will necessarily involve three major activities (Pressley, 2000; Reutzel et al., 2016; Shanahan et al., 2010). First, based on Schema Theory (Anderson & Pearson, 1981) will be the teacher's role to activate, build, correct, or develop schemas, or cognitive knowledge packages stored and linked together into a massive, complex knowledge network in the mind, to support reading comprehension. Second will be to explicitly instruct and apply evidence-based reading comprehension strategies, such as story structure, questioning, monitoring, summarizing, and graphic organizers in a variety of complex, grade-level narrative texts (National Reading Panel, 2000). Finally, teachers will use close text readings (Adler, 1940) and discussion to deepen students' understanding of narrative texts to know what the text says, know how the text works, and determine what the text means using Kintsch's (2005) CI Theory to guide and frame these close readings and discussions of narrative texts.

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