

# Young Meaning Makers

Teaching Comprehension, Grades K-2

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Foreword by P. David Pearson



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## Preface

With this book, we hope to clarify how the Common Core State Reading Standards (CCSS) for teaching literature and informational texts were meant to be understood and implemented by classroom teachers during comprehension instruction. If one reads the documents describing the CCSS for reading, reading comprehension instruction seldom if ever is mentioned. The curious absence of the ultimate objective in reading instruction—comprehension—in the standards' documents at first raised concerns among practitioners and scholars alike. How could comprehension instruction not have a clear and obvious presence in the CCSS Reading Standards?

There are at least two plausible explanations for the seeming inattention to the centrality of comprehension instruction in the CCSS. First, the CCSS assiduously avoided replicating the structure of the five elements of reading instruction so prominently practiced as insular components as a result of the Report of the National Reading Panel (2000). These CCSS Reading Standards were designed expressly to integrate the five components of effective reading instruction the NRP reported out. They were not intended to reify the structure and elements of effective reading instruction—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—as instructional silos to be taught each day with a designated time allotment and accompanying standards. Second, the CCSS Reading Standards, if properly viewed by professional developers, teachers, and scholars, were intended to send a new message about reading instruction. The Reading Standards were intended to be the *comprehension* standards for learning from literature and informational texts. Furthermore, these *comprehension* standards weren't just a listing of random skills and strategies in comprehension. The standards reading literature and informational text were grounded in a strong theoretical framework that had been empirically studied for many decades. The theoretical framework supporting the CCSS for reading literature and informational text is known as the Construction–Integration Model of Text Comprehension by Dr. Walter Kintsch (2013).

Kintsch's model of text comprehension processes and its connection to the CCSS Reading Standards have been highlighted by Pearson and Hiebert (2015) in *Research-Based Practice for Teaching Common Core Literacy*. Additionally, P. D. Pearson recently highlighted the centrality of Construction–Integration Theory of Text Comprehension processes in his Jeanne S. Chall address at Harvard University ([www.gse.harvard.edu/news/15/10/watch-11th-annual-jeanne-s-chall-lecture](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/15/10/watch-11th-annual-jeanne-s-chall-lecture)).

The intent of this book is to show how the content and structure of the CCSS for reading literature and informational text are structured in a tiered sequence of Anchor Standard clusters that mirror the text comprehension processes Kintsch describes in his theory: first, construction of meaning; and second, integration of constructed meaning into the long-term world knowledge and experiential store in the human mind. Beginning with the construction process, the CCSS Reading Standards encompass a cluster of three standards intended to ensure that students are able to determine the key ideas and details represented in text; these three standards correspond with Kintsch's construction of the micro text structure. For students to progress, they must be able to appropriately attend to the elements and ideas presented in the text. Next, the CCSS Reading Standards describe another cluster of three Anchor Reading Standards intended to ensure that students can determine and use the author's craft and structure as represented in text; these standards correspond with Kintsch's construction of the macro text structure. It is here that students determine how the author has crafted the text to include the use of literary devices and text structures to construct an organizational framework (macrostructure) for the key ideas and details (microstructure) in the text resulting in the creation of what Kintsch (2013) calls a textbase or representation of what was in the text. Finally, the CCSS reading standards list a third cluster of three standards intended to ensure that students integrate the ideas represented in the textbase by engaging in Kintsch's integration of the situation model of the text into their background knowledge.

In Chapter 1, we lay out the case for viewing the CCSS Reading Standards through the lens of Kintsch's Construction–Integration (CI) Model of Text Comprehension. We describe how children can be taught to process texts using this theory and how teachers can select and implement the CCSS Reading Standards to match the processes of text comprehension described by W. Kintsch (2013). We do this by comparing the most well-known and -used model of comprehension, schema theory, with CI theory, demonstrating how the CCSS for reading

were designed to support, in content and sequence, the CI text-processing model rather than schema theory. We also provide a sample lesson demonstrating how teachers can utilize the CCSS Reading Standards to ensure that students are able to process text at the levels of, first, construction, then, integration.

In Chapter 2, we describe how the CCSS for speaking and listening can be addressed using the CI Model to build an oral language base for use in later text comprehension processes. Research demonstrates a clear and enduring connection between early oral language processing and later reading comprehension ability. This chapter shows teachers of young children how they can begin building text comprehension processes to increase students' oral language comprehension using many of the evidence-based practices that speech-language pathologists use. Sample strategies and lessons are provided using literature and informational text examples.

In Chapter 3, we focus attention on applying the CI Model to the CCSS reading standards for literature. Literature has long played a pivotal role in developing young children's early comprehension. Text selection for developing young children's comprehension using literature, as found in CCSS Reading Anchor Standard 10, is given initial attention in this chapter. Next, we provide sample comprehension lessons for teaching reading lessons using the CI Model and the CCSS reading standards with literature. We begin with constructing microstructure with literature and then progress to constructing macrostructure with literature to create a textbase. After describing the "C" or construction phase of the CI Model, we describe a series of sample lessons for building a situation model that is to be integrated into background knowledge. We wrap up this chapter by discussing the benefits of using a CI Model in conjunction with the CCSS reading standards for literature to develop young students' comprehension of appropriately challenging literary texts. In Chapter 4, we repeat this process with respect to applying the CI Model to the CCSS for reading informational text.

In the final chapter of this book, we turn our attention to assessing young students' comprehension growth through developing formative assessments that probe students' abilities to meet the demands of the CCSS reading standards with literature and informational text at various grade levels and at various stages of the CI Model of Text Comprehension processes. We discuss three ways in which reading comprehension has been assessed in the past: (1) free recall, (2) probed recall, and (3) sentence verification tasks. We discuss the fact that these assessments

tend to treat comprehension as a unitary construct. The problem with this approach is that comprehension is anything but a unitary construct. Next, we treat the topic of formative versus summative assessments. Until major assessment producers provide access to formative, benchmarking assessments, teachers will need to know how to make their own. To help teachers, we show how a formative assessment plan based on the CCSS Reading Standards and the CI Text Comprehension Model can be designed. Finally we describe how to develop formative assessment tasks for each of the four stages of the CI Text Comprehension Model: (1) microstructure, (2) macrostructure, (3) situation model, and (4) integration of the situation model into background knowledge stored in long-term memory.

As authors, it is our hope not only that this book will support teachers in providing more theoretically sound, coherent, and effective comprehension instruction, but that our readers will begin to view the CCSS reading standards for Literature and Informational Text as theoretically based and arranged into clusters to be used in an intentional, sequenced, and cogent way, rather than randomly selecting one or more CCSS Reading Anchor Standards and focusing on these throughout the instruction of a text.

If we can help teachers both understand the theoretical structure of the CCSS for reading literature and informational text and that they need to select a standard from each of the three Anchor Standard clusters in order to deepen students' comprehension during subsequent "close readings" of text, we will have succeeded in our objectives for writing this book. Please let us know as you read and use this book your experiences in teaching literature and informational text using the theoretical lens of Kintsch's CI Model of Text Comprehension to select and teach comprehension lessons that meet the integrated, multi-leveled processes encompassed in the arrangement of the CCSS reading standard clusters and anchor standards. Teachers with whom we have worked and who have converted their teaching to the ideas presented in this book tell us that it has changed how they view text comprehension. But most importantly, they tell us it has given them an explanation as to why and how to engage their students in close readings of text to deepen their students' text comprehension.

—*D. Ray Reutzel, Sarah K. Clark, Cindy D. Jones, Sandi L. Gillam*

# Comprehension Instruction

## The Importance of Theory

There is nothing so practical as a good theory.

—Kurt Lewin

### CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Reading comprehension is indisputably the ultimate objective of reading instruction and constitutes the very essence of the act of reading (Duke, Pearson, Strachan, & Billman, 2011; Durkin, 1993). Although discrepancies exist among educators and researchers concerning definitions, processes, goals, and the methods for teaching reading comprehension in school classrooms, virtually all would agree without hesitation that reading comprehension skills are essential to thrive in a world saturated with traditional and digital print.

The National Reading Panel (2000) defined reading comprehension as “*intentional thinking* during which meaning is constructed through interactions between text and reader. . . . The construction of meaning is influenced by the text and by the reader’s prior knowledge and experience that are brought to bear on it” (pp. 4–5, emphasis added). The RAND Reading Study Group (Snow, 2002) described the elements of reading comprehension as the following:

1. The reader
2. The text
3. The purpose for reading
4. The sociocultural context shaped by such things as the reader’s home environment, peer groups, and relationships within the school setting



The first three components—the reader, the text, and the purpose for reading—occur within the fourth element, the sociocultural context. The *reader* is the one doing the comprehending, and the *text* is the object to be comprehended (literature, informational text, etc.). The *purpose* refers to the kind of task, skill, strategy, or concept the reader is attempting to perform (e.g., determining key ideas and details, following a sequence of events, or thinking about an author’s perspective).

The *sociocultural context* of reading comprehension can be thought of in at least two ways. First, sociocultural context is the actual physical setting where reading occurs—at home, in a school classroom, the library, under a blanket with a flashlight at bedtime, and so on. Second, it is the social situation in which the comprehension of what is read occurs. In some cases, reading comprehension occurs individually—when the reader is alone. In other cases, reading comprehension occurs within a vibrant social exchange where students and teachers read a text together and jointly construct and integrate meaning through discussion.

Prior to learning to read, young children’s narrative comprehension processes develop in parallel with oral language skills. Young children who possess strong oral language skills and who have the ability to comprehend texts aurally and orally tend to succeed later on in reading comprehension (Kendeou, van den Broek, White, & Lynch, 2007). Research also has shown that young children who struggle to comprehend oral language often struggle as well in early reading instruction and beyond (Catts, Fey, Tomblin, & Zhang, 2002; Kamhi & Catts, 2002; Nation, Cocksey, Taylor, & Bishop, 2010). As a consequence, there is little reason to delay comprehension instruction in the early years of schooling, first as a skill for oral language and then as foundational to print comprehension.

The view that comprehension instruction should and can be taught effectively to students in the early grades differs dramatically from a long-held view that decoding processes must be developed before comprehension processes. The Common Core State Standards endorse comprehension instruction in the early grades, as evidenced in the speaking and listening strand’s comprehension Anchor Standard and in the reading strand’s first three three clusters—key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas—of 10 Anchor Standards.

*Schema theory*, a widely known and popular theory of reading comprehension, for many years informed classroom comprehension instruction (Anderson & Pearson, 1981). Schema theory, in its time, was a quantum leap forward from previous practices that emphasized the teaching of discrete reading comprehension skills. Schema theory emphasized

how important a reader's background knowledge was in the process of comprehending text. Schemas are represented as "packages" of knowledge stored in a reader's long-term memory that can be enlisted to aid in the comprehension of text. Schema theory, and its subsequent research, has demonstrated quite convincingly that when students bring copious amounts of background knowledge about language, text, and the world to the task of text comprehension, they have a much easier time making sense of it (Pressley, 2001). Consequently, teachers, even in the earliest years of schooling, can have an observable effect on the development of students' schemas, which are strong enablers of text comprehension.

On the other hand, schema theory, as a framework for teaching reading comprehension, often positioned the text as an obstacle to comprehension that could be overcome by activating or building schemas rather than as an evidentiary base for constructing or elaborating students' schemas. For example, teachers who ground their instruction in schema theory would likely scaffold students' background knowledge for the story of the *Little Red Hen* by focusing on the story's theme and how it connects to the students' background experiences rather than focusing instruction on the text and how to build or elaborate a schema by constructing a mental representation of text-based information.

The effects of anchoring classroom comprehension instruction in schema theory have become ubiquitous in published core reading programs and in observations of teachers' comprehension instructional practices. When schema theory is used to inform comprehension instruction, teachers typically begin a lesson by "activating" or "building" their students' background knowledge as preparation for encountering the text. Because schemas cannot overcome all text obstacles, often students also are taught comprehension strategies as a "stop-gap" for working their way through a text. Discussions around text, when informed by schema theory, often have focused also on responding to or assessing the constellation of ideas students bring to the text from their background knowledge rather than attending predominantly to text-dependent ideas. In short, the context and emphasis that have characterized schema-driven comprehension instruction in elementary classrooms have focused primarily on developing a schema by activating, building, elaborating, or modifying students' background knowledge. An unanticipated outcome of the focus on schema theory and its applications to comprehension instruction in elementary classrooms has been an unintended neglect of text as an evidentiary base for supporting multiple levels of comprehension processing.