CHAPTER 2

# Beyond the Reader

## Texts and Contexts of Comprehension



In the first chapter, we focused on what the reader brings to the comprehension process. We explored proficient reading by considering how meaning construction and integration hypothetically occurs. Now we move beyond the reader by linking the good comprehender model to instruction. Comprehension includes four elements that influence the construction of meaning:

1. The *reader,* who engages in the comprehension process.
2. The *text,* which is read for comprehension.
3. The *purpose, task,* or *activity,* which is undertaken for comprehension.
4. The *context,* which surrounds and also bounds the comprehending event.

Scholars hired by the RAND Corporation (Snow, 2002) developed this four-component model of reading comprehension. However, we feel it creates unnecessary complexity. We believe that the content of reading comprehension, and especially its instruction, cannot be considered separately from a reader's purpose or task for reading. Therefore, our revised model, in Figure 2.1, makes the task and purpose part of the context of the reading.

Imagine a fifth grader who selected the novel *Hatchet* (Paulsen, 1987) for summer beach reading. Basking in the sun, this reader becomes engrossed in the main character's repeated attempts to survive while dealing with the pain of his parents' divorce. Now read *Hatchet* in a classroom and surround it with graphic organizers and a computer-based Accelerated Reader assessment. The whole reading experience shifts. The purpose for reading

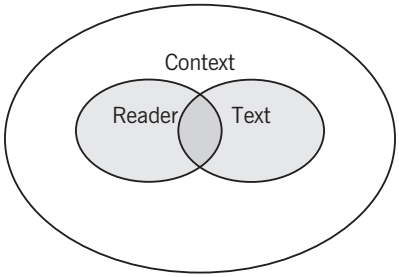



**FIGURE 2.1.** Elements of reading comprehension instruction.

is no longer aesthetic appreciation, getting lost in a good book; instead it becomes a means to achieve academic accountability. Context matters in literacy learning.

### GOALS FOR THIS CHAPTER

- ✓ Explore reading habits and attitudes by profiling three students.
- ✓ Review the elements of comprehension.
- ✓ Think about selecting readable texts.
- ✓ Examine the contexts of reading comprehension.

## A PROFILE OF THREE STUDENTS

Say hello to Miguel, Brody, and Tanisha. These students and their teachers will reappear throughout the book. We use them to illustrate how comprehension instruction must change with the context, materials, and abilities of the readers. Miguel, who is in Mrs. Wilson's sixth-grade classroom, is a member of a fantasy book club with five other students. Miguel, who reads above his grade level, is a third-generation American who grew up in a middle-class household where Spanish was spoken regularly. Although he is a fluent speaker of Spanish, he is equally facile with English. In his spare time, he enjoys reading, particularly fantasy, science fiction, and mysteries. He has traveled extensively with his educated parents.

Currently, Miguel is reading *Rowan of Rin* (Rodda, 2004) in preparation for a group meeting with Mrs. Wilson. The novel recounts the adventures of an initially timid Rowan who helps to save the villagers of mythical Rin from imminent disaster. As Miguel reads, he writes on a two-column chart

the attributes and development of one of the main characters. In the first column, he notes the character's traits and personality. He also records any changes he observes in the character's thinking or feeling over time. In the second column, he substantiates each claim, citing proof from the text.

Brody, a student in Mr. Rodriguez's second-grade classroom, is studying weather, learning to describe it and to understand its causes and effects. Brody, who comes from a rural community, reads below grade level. He has been diagnosed with reading difficulties, is easily distracted, and has struggled with reading and writing since kindergarten. Decoding and spelling cause him considerable problems and he reads haltingly. Whenever possible, he avoids reading, both in and out of school.

Brody is working on an integrated social studies, science, and literacy unit. He is evaluating the usefulness of a website to answer a question about the weather. He reviews a website that Mr. Rodriguez bookmarked earlier. Brody begins by clicking the first link. He tries hard to understand what is on the page—but to no avail. He rereads the first passage but still can't tell whether the information on the page is useful. So he looks earnestly at the visuals, hoping that they will help him. Brody realizes this website is too difficult to read on his own. So, he selects another website that appears more promising.

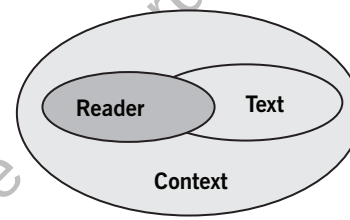
Tanisha, a fourth-grader in Ms. Fogel's class, is reading a leveled book, from her basal reading program, with her teacher and other members of her small homogeneous reading group. Tanisha has grown up in a low-income, urban neighborhood. She can read most grade-level texts independently, but needs some support when reading science and social studies material. She much prefers fiction to nonfiction texts when given the choice, but in general, she dislikes reading in her spare time, both in and out of school.

Ms. Fogel assigned her on-grade students a leveled reader after they completed the main selection from the basal program. This leveled text reinforces vocabulary and provides additional practice in finding the main idea, the skill of the week. Tanisha dutifully completes her assigned work in the allotted time.

Although the ultimate goal of these three readers is to understand text, what they gain from their in-class reading will vary from one reader to the next. Each student lives and works in multiple contexts and each of these contexts influences his or her growth as a reader and writer. Over time, these children have developed personal views about the nature and purpose of reading and have established attitudes about the role that reading plays in their lives. Their beliefs are shaped by the materials and lessons in their classroom, the standards and goals of their school, and the current political context of reading instruction in the United States. For example, Miguel's instructional context emphasizes reading for pleasure and for

learning literature concepts. In Brody's classroom, acquisition of knowledge drives instruction. For Tanisha, a primary learning objective is the mastery of comprehension skills and strategies. The instruction experienced by each student represents one of the three frameworks that we target in the book: literature-based instruction, inquiry learning with informational texts, and reading with a basal reading series. However, we want to make an important point here. Students whose literacy block is either literature based or inquiry oriented must read richly from literature and informational texts throughout the day and students working with a basal reading program must read beyond it.

## THE ELEMENTS OF COMPREHENSION

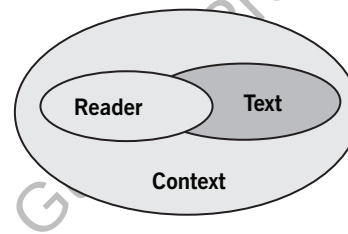



Whether a *reader* successfully and deeply understands a text depends upon numerous factors:

- *Cognitive and neurological abilities*: the biological inheritance that readers bring to reading, such as their capacities for perception, attention, memory, and language learning (Pressley et al., 1989).
- *Precursor skills*: knowledge of grammar, phonological awareness, decoding ability, sight-word recognition, which influences fluency, and in turn, comprehension.
- *Vocabulary knowledge*: word knowledge, which predicts reading comprehension (Davis, 1944) and accounts for much of a reader's comprehension ability.
- *Conceptual knowledge*: conceptual, disciplinary knowledge and associated vocabulary; familiarity with other texts, genres, and literary conventions.
- *Personal experiences*: the knowledge gained through living one's life and engaging in the world, including the narratives of our lives about love, loss, bravery, and reconciliation. Personal experiences also include knowledge obtained from direct home and community experiences, which includes literacy practices. These socially and culturally based "funds of knowledge" from out-of-school settings constitute a rich resource that often is overlooked, unacknowledged, or neglected in academic settings (Moll et al., 1992).
- *Strategic knowledge*: the knowledge of powerful tactics that supports meaning construction and integration; knowledge of what strategies

are and how to apply them, as well as why, when, and where to use them.

- *Interest and motivation*: individual preferences, the beliefs about ability and competence; expectations for success; goals motivating achievement, persistence, and performance; and values and internal or external reasons prompting choices and task completion.
- *Metacognition:* the knowledge of personal strengths and limitations as a reader and the ability to set purposes for reading, monitor comprehension, eliminate obstacles to comprehension, and to evaluate performance and understanding relative to goals.




*Text* is a second key element in teaching reading comprehension. Although text traditionally referred to printed words, the term now denotes anything that symbolically communicates information. In our swiftly changing digital world, text signifies not only traditional printed content but also digital material that communicates information through writing, still or moving images, sound, and the complex interplay of these forms on the Internet. Reading these texts requires multiliteracies and new literacies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Leu et al., 2008).



## DEFINING AND SELECTING READABLE TEXT

Text matters in reading comprehension instruction for two reasons. First, it is vital for teachers to know how to choose texts or to guide students when they make their own selections. The more a teacher knows about how a text works, the more professional judgment can be applied to matching a text to the needs and interests of a particular student. We introduce the factors involved in text selection now but expand upon them later when we consider teaching literature and informational text.

Second, teachers need to understand how a text works in order to plan and teach reading comprehension. Particular features of text can aid or thwart comprehension, including (1) the genre of a particular text, (2) the level of conceptual abstraction, (3) the transparency of the text's organization, (4) the clarity of sentence structure and syntax, (5) the difficulty of the vocabulary, and (6) the readability of the text.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS; NGA & CCSSO, 2010), adopted by 45 states, describe the types of texts that students should be able

to read. As students move up through the grades, they need to read a range of harder and more diverse texts. A third-grade student is expected to read mostly on-grade-level books but to occasionally venture into fourth-grade terrain. The difficulty of a text is important because one goal of the CCSS is to reverse the "general, steady decline . . . in the difficulty and likely also the sophistication of content of the texts students have been asked to read in school since 1962" (Appendix A, p. 2).

### *Matching Students and Texts*

Part of improving comprehension instruction is picking the right book. Matching students to texts requires evaluating the texts, knowing your students, and considering the goals of your classroom activities. We strongly recommend examining the texts and considering their readability and accessibility. Readability is a measure of text difficulty; accessibility refers to other qualities of writing such as organization, clarity, and graphics. You must also consider the students' knowledge, backgrounds, capabilities, needs, and interests. Finally, it is important to think about instructional goals. Is the student reading this book independently or will he or she require some instructional support?

Readability formulas are the oldest quantitative tools we have to assess the difficulty of text. Included in this category are well-established tools like the Fry readability formula, the Flesch–Kincaid formula, and the Lexile system. Readability formulas use estimates of vocabulary difficulty and sentence complexity to determine the grade level of the text—or its readability level. Using the Fry readability formula (Fry, 1977) one counts the number of sentences and the number of syllables within a 100-word sample of a text. Fewer sentences mean longer sentences and often, greater complexity. More syllables mean more multisyllabic words and therefore more difficult vocabulary. These measures are then repeated several times across a long text with the results averaged. A chart plots the number of syllables against the number of sentences to indicate grade level of the text. In theory the grade level of the books can be matched to the reading level of the student, but such matches are always approximations that must be verified as the child reads.

You can also measure the readability of a text using Microsoft Word or readability formulae available on the Internet *(www.readabilityformulas.com)*. Microsoft Word uses the Flesch–Kincaid formula and it is found within the grammar tool on most versions of Microsoft Word.

The Lexile system is a newer, quantitative approach to determining readability. When using the Fry formula, one samples small segments of the

text to produce the score. In the Lexile system, a computer analyzes entire books using estimates of vocabulary difficulty and sentence complexity as the measure of readability. This computer analysis yields a statistic for each text, known as a Lexile score, which ranges from 200L to 1500 + L, with a BR level for beginning readers. The Lexile score loosely corresponds to a grade-level designation. The Lexile website *(www.lexile.com)* lists the reading levels of tens of thousands of books. A book can be assigned a Lexile score or a student can receive a Lexile score, if he or she takes one of several reading tests. Many current reading tests, including the Gates–MacGinitie Reading Test (MacGinitie, MacGinitie, Maria, & Dryer, 2000) and the Qualitative Reading Inventory–5 (QRI-5; Leslie & Caldwell, 2010), now include a Lexile score along with grade level, percentile, and standard scores. Because both a student and a text are on the same scale, matching them is relatively easy.

Hiebert (2012) has suggested that the Lexile score alone is less useful in determining the difficulty of a book than the mean word frequency and the mean sentence length, which form the bases of the Lexile score. These two separate scores can be obtained by typing in 500 words of a book into the Lexile Analyzer *(www.lexile.com).* With these results the teacher can determine if it is the difficulty of the vocabulary or just the sentence length that is contributing to the book's difficulty. A book with a modest vocabulary challenge but long sentences might not present difficulty to a given child.

Measures of readability are always imperfect because they fail to consider many factors of text difficulty and accessibility, including the reader's background knowledge and interests, the organization of the text, the clarity of the writing, and the author's voice. Book leveling, a system introduced by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell (2009) examines and ranks books on a scale from *A* and *B* for beginning readers up through *Z* for seventh- and eighth-grade readers. The book-leveling system considers the content of the book, the support provided by the illustrations, length, language structure, format, and the appropriateness of the text to the readers' experiences. Since many of these judgments are subjective, leveling can be used alongside the more objective readability formulas (Fry, 2002).

A more sophisticated analysis of text complexity is afforded by the Coh-Metrix procedure *(http://cohmetrix.memphis.edu/cohmetrixpr/index.html).* The Coh-Metrix analysis begins with readability and then yields substantial information on text cohesion, or how clearly the ideas support and explain one another. This approach analyzes the way that different ideas in a text go together. Highly cohesive texts explicitly include text features that broadcast connections among words (signal words like *because* and *since*) and larger units of text. Thus, they scaffold the reader. Less cohesive texts, in contrast, present greater challenges because readers have to figure out

how the distinct ideas in a text link together. All these quantitative measures are useful for evaluating text difficulty, but other factors come into play when selecting texts for comprehension instruction.

The CCSS (NGA & CCSSO, 2010) recommend three dimensions for selecting text: (a) quantitative, (b) qualitative, and (c) reader–text match. The quantitative dimension includes readability measures such as Lexile scores or grade levels computed from one of several readability formulae. Hiebert (2012) suggests that qualitative aspects of text can be determined by considering four factors as teachers examine a book. These factors are presented below in Figure 2.2, which is slightly adapted from Hiebert (2012).

The final step is matching the student and the text, always considering the purpose. For example, a text with a simple structure, a clear unambiguous theme, and minimal knowledge demands might be an excellent choice for independent reading. During teacher-guided instruction a more

| Dimension | Stage 1 | Stage 3 | Stage 5 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Levels of meaning | Single level of meaning (often supported by illustrations) Aims/themes explicitly stated (*The Bear's Toothache*, McPhail, 1988) | More than one level of meaning (*Frederick*, Lionni, 1973) a book about responsibility and the role of art Requires inferring of characters' motives and/or how text features may influence plot | Multiple levels require drawing extensively on reading/experiences from other sources Implicit purpose may be hidden or obscure (*Holes*, Sachar, 1998) |
| Structure | Texts follow structure of common genres (e.g., simple story structure or enumerative exposition) (*Baby Whales Drink Milk*, Esbensen, 1994) | More complex story structures, cause and effect relationships in exposition (*From Seed to Plant*, Gibbons, 1993) | Foreshadowing, flashback, multiple interacting plots or mixture structures (problem solution and description) in exposition |
| Language conventions and clarity | Literal language (*Frog and Toad,* Lobel, 1994) | Figurative language, irony (*Matilda*, Dahl, 1988) | Literary: high level of figurative, metaphorical language (*Out of the Dust*, Hesse, 1999) |
| Knowledge demands | Simple theme (*Frog and Toad*, Lobel, 1994) | Complex ideas interwoven (*Ramona Forever*, Cleary, 1995) | Interconnected themes (*The View from Saturday*, Konigsberg, 1996) |

**FIGURE 2.2.** Qualitative dimensions of text complexity.

challenging text might be in order because the teacher can provide some of the required knowledge and assist the student with negotiating complex language, multiple themes, and different levels of meaning.

### *Range of Texts*

Texts influence the growth of students' reading comprehension. To succeed in school and beyond, students need exposure to a wide range of literature and informational texts. Reading many easy books will build fluency; reading many challenging books will build vocabulary, knowledge, and comprehension. Students who stick to a narrow range of texts probably will find that material easy to understand, but they may not benefit from struggling with something new. Figure 2.3, from the CCSS (NGA & CCSSO, 2010), defines what students should be reading in school.

#### *Literature*

The broad category of literature includes several genres or categories, each of which can be divided into subgenres. Each genre conforms to a culturally accepted and conventional style, form, and content. A text belongs to a particular genre when it exhibits the features of other pieces of writing in the same group. Styles of homes can be likened to genres of literature. Each type has unique characteristics that make it recognizable. For instance,



**COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS**

Over time, students are expected to comprehend a range of texts from a variety of cultures and historical periods. The range of materials specified by the CCSS includes both literature and informational texts.

| **Literature** | | | **Informational Text** |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Stories* | *Dramas* | *Poetry* | *Literary Nonfiction, Historical, Scientific, and Technical Texts* |
| Includes children's adventure stories, folktales, legends, fables, fantasy, realistic fiction, and myth. | Includes staged dialogue and brief familiar scenes. | Includes nursery rhymes and the subgenres of the narrative poem, limerick, and free verse. | Includes biographies and autobiographies, history, social science, and the arts, technical texts, including directions, forms, and information displayed in graphic form and digital sources on a range of topics. |

**FIGURE 2.3.** What students should be reading in school, according to the CCSS.

Tuscan-style homes, which look like villas, are built of pale stone or stucco, burnt-orange terra-cotta roofs, and graceful arching doorways. Thus, the genre of drama specifies a form of fiction that depicts a performance by actors speaking lines before an audience. A drama can be contemporary or historical, humorous or tragic. Familiarity with the broad genres of literature, drama, stories, and poetry clues you to their structure and organization. When readers know something about the characteristics and purposes of genres, their comprehension improves (Goldman & Rakestraw, 2000).

Knowledge of subgenres is even more beneficial. For example, stories can be divided into realistic fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, science fiction, and folktales. Each subgenre exhibits its own structure, purpose, and conventions. Realistic fiction includes short stories and novels that are set in current time and that involve real people who struggle with contemporary issues. Although written as a story, they help readers to empathize and relate to the entanglements of others who are just like them. In contrast, fantasy features improbable settings and characters that are often set in imaginary lands and times. Subgenres sometimes overlap. For example, fairytales are a type of folktale. They can share elements of fantasy—such as witches and fairy godmothers. Sonnets and haikus are both subgenres of poetry with different structures. Sonnets, which come from Europe, are 14-line poems, written in iambic pentameter, that follow a specific rhyming scheme. In contrast, haikus, which are associated with Japan, are descriptive, three-line poems that adopt a five-syllable, seven-syllable, and five-syllable structure.

The purpose of a text is reflected in its subgenre—and each one has its own conventions. Authors adopt a particular subgenre to best meet an intended purpose. A fable entertains young children with a short tale and conveys a moral or ethical principle. We also know that fables showcase the exploits and foibles of beasts that take on human attributes. Historical fiction entertains readers with common human themes but teaches important lessons about particular historical eras. We all know of fairytales that begin with the customary phrase *Once upon a time . . .* , and end with . . . *They lived happily ever after*, and showcase the triumph of good over evil, and the vindication of the powerless over the powerful.

Recognizing how an author organizes the ideas in a text, the *text structure*, improves comprehension. Ample research has documented that when children receive direct instruction in text structure, their comprehension grows because the structure serves as a map to the important ideas (Fitzgerald & Spiegel, 1983). The simplest literary stories follow a story grammar that includes the following elements: characters, setting, problem, goal, events, and solution. Instruction in story grammar, often called story mapping, guides students to analyze a story into its basic parts, keeping them in

sequence. The knowledge of text structure helps students make predictions, remember key ideas, and retell what they have read (Armbruster, Anderson, & Ostertag, 1987; Gersten, Fuchs, Williams, & Baker, 2001; Williams, Stafford, Lauer, Hall, & Pollini, 2009).

As students move into the upper grades, the number of structural features of literature they encounter increases; and thus, simple story mapping inadequately reflects the complexity of novels and some short stories. While some elements like character and setting remain easy to identify, others may be subtler, requiring more inferential thinking. Noting a character's goals, motives, and feelings require greater interpretive skill. Literature also becomes more complex as each event in a story includes an action, a physical or mental response, and a consequence. Plot follows a series of rising actions; tension and suspense build until the climax is reached. Then, there is a gradual unfolding, or denouement, as problems untangle through a process of falling action.

In any given novel, there may be multiple subplots and conflicts to confront and resolve. Also, the author may employ additional plot devices that give a reader a glimpse into the future through foreshadowing or thrusts him or her into the past through flashbacks. All of these demands require the reader to develop a more nuanced view of the structure of literature.

In the upper elementary years, the problems in stories are often referred to as conflicts—individual versus individual, individual versus nature, individual versus self, individual versus technology. These various types of conflicts, as they are expressed in the development of the characters, are often a major clue to the underlying theme of the work. Theme is an expression of the big ideas in the story, a timeless view of human nature.

Below the text structure lie other text features that help or hinder the comprehension of literature. We refer here to the relational links that a reader must build between ideas, between pronouns and nouns, and between sentences. These mandatory connections help to form the text base, which we described in Chapter 1 when we introduced the construction–integration model. Consider this very short passage from the opening of *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* (Steig, 1969):

> Sylvester Duncan lived with his mother and father at Acorn Road in Oatdale. One of his hobbies was collecting pebbles of unusual shape and size.
>
> On a rainy Saturday during vacation he found a quite extraordinary one. It was flaming red, shiny, and perfectly round, like a marble. As he was studying the remarkable pebble, he began to shiver, probably from excitement, and the rain felt cold on his back. "I wish it would stop raining," he said. (n.p.)

In this segment the reader must make some important connections. The phrase, *a quite extraordinary one*, must be linked to the pebbles in the first paragraph and then through the pronoun *it* to the pebble's description. Further on, the reader must link the descriptive words *extraordinary* to *remarkable* to build a full understanding of the pebble, because the illustration adds little to the author's description of the pebble.

Genre, text structure, and the myriad connections between ideas represent a silent contract between author and reader. The author selects particular genres, subgenres, and text structures to alert the reader to hold certain expectations during reading. This understanding between the author and reader supports the construction of meaning. How does it work? Experiences with the purposes and characteristics of various genres and subgenres can promote students' development of deep textual knowledge. Those with more knowledge about texts are better equipped to comprehend an array of literature. What is more, studying text structure and genre enables readers to predict what lies ahead and to zoom in on important ideas. In fact, one contribution to poor reading is the failure of readers to pick up on the cues and conventions that authors employ to aid readers in recognizing particular text structures and genres (Goldman & Rakestraw, 2000).



### *Informational Text*

Comprehension of informational texts also requires an understanding of genre, text structure, and the same small connections necessary for coherence found in literature. Within the broad category of informational text there are the genres of literary nonfiction, historical, scientific, and technical texts. Literary nonfiction includes biography, autobiography, memoirs, and some historical accounts. These texts follow a narrative structure and typically include setting, characters, problems, conflict, plots, and resolution. Informational text, which also comes in a non-narrative or expository form, can be found in a science or social science textbook, newspaper, magazine, or the Internet.

The genres of historical, scientific, and technical texts follow several text structures. Authors select different text structures depending upon their purposes for writing—and a single chapter might contain several of them. There are distinct text structures for describing, expressing, explaining something, or persuading others to agree on a specific issue. It is unlikely that a teacher would teach all of these structures within an academic year, but there is ample evidence that a concentrated focus on one of these structures for 8 weeks or more will improve students' comprehension—even for struggling readers (Williams et al., 2002). The most common expository structures are listed in Figure 2.4.

| Structure | Description | Example | Common Signal Words |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Description* | What something looks, feels, smells, sounds, tastes like, or is composed of | Characteristics of a hurricane | *Characteristics, features, to illustrate, for example, for instance, such as, is like, looks like* |
| *Sequence* | When or in what order things happen | How a seed becomes a plant | *First, next, then, finally, first, second, third, before, after, when, now* |
| *Problem–solution* | What went wrong and how it was or could be fixed | The Exxon Valdez sank and spilled oil all over the bay, requiring a community-wide and corporate clean-up | *Problem is, because, in order to, so that, trouble was, if/then, solved, puzzle/answer* |
| *Cause–effect* | How one event or a series of events lead to another | The Civil War and its causes; the aftermath of the war and its effects | *Because, therefore, cause, effect, so, as a result, consequently, hence, due to, thus, this led to, brought about, produce, trigger, affect* |
| *Compare–contrast* | How things, people, and events are alike and different | Compare and contrast sedimentary, igneous, and metamorphic rocks | *Both, alike, unalike, but, however, than, on the other hand, but, similarly, although, also, in contrast, in comparison, same, different, either/or, just like* |

**FIGURE 2.4.** Expository text structures in nonfiction.



In addition to using familiar patterns, or text structures, to organize ideas, authors of informational text can strive to make a text "considerate" to help a reader locate and retain important information (T. H. Anderson & Armbruster, 1984). A considerate text has topic sentences, clear headings, and subheadings that foretell information to come. They also include boldfacing of key facts and concepts, visuals that support text content, hyperlinks in digital text that connect to background information or definitions, and chapter-ending summaries that restate important topics. All of these textual devices act as a map making it easier for the reader to follow the author's ideas and arguments. However, considerateness alone does not ensure better comprehension. Not all easy-to-comprehend informational texts include all these features. For example, the books of Seymour Simon lack most textual features like headings, subheading, and bolding, but instead feature rich photographs that provide text support. Furthermore, even when textbooks contain many features of considerateness, they may

still be difficult to understand (Beck, McKeown, Sinatra, & Loxterman, 1991).

The clarity and engagement of the writing will affect comprehension. Remember the construction–integration model that has guided our discussion of comprehension? It requires that a reader forge connections among ideas, words, and sentences and then integrate those understandings with prior knowledge. A text becomes more comprehensible when it is easier to make connections among ideas and when the burden of prior knowledge is eased. This is especially true when reading science, geography, civics, or history—a situation in which the reader's prior knowledge may be lacking. So an informational text that supports comprehension should include the following cohesive devices:

- Spelled-out relationships between pronouns and nouns.
- Sufficient explanation to compensate for a lack of prior knowledge.
- Clear links between new concepts and previous ideas.
- Obvious cause-and-effect relationships among ideas.

Isabel Beck and her colleagues adopted these guidelines and revised fourth-grade social studies texts (Beck et al., 1991). In rewriting the originals, the researchers ensured that all cohesive devices were clear. For example, they added nouns when the pronoun–noun relationships were vague and incorporated knowledge that many readers might lack. Such changes made the revised texts longer. They also raised readability levels by 1 year. Yet, students' comprehension improved despite the added length and increasing reading level.

The final text feature that affects comprehension is the way an author speaks to the reader, or the *voice* an author uses to communicate thoughts and feelings. A text with voice does not have the "leaded, impersonal tone" (Ravitch, 1989, p. 27) that attempts to convey objectivity by eliminating any personal touches. Instead, an author uses language that shows that the topic is personally meaningful—and invites the reader to think so too. In Figure 2.5, compare the short passage from a traditional textbook (Sample 1, Davidson & Stoff, 2011) to a second one (Sample 2, Hakim, 2003) that we think is more engaging.

To add voice to historical texts Hakim (2003) uses several techniques. First, her writing is vivid with far more sensory details. Second, she eases the burden of prior knowledge by including potentially unknown details. Third, there is an element of humor in her writing. Adding voice to a textbook potentially makes information more memorable and enhances a student's ability to answer comprehension questions correctly (Beck et al.,

**Sample 1**

The first colonist arrived in Virginia in the spring of 1607. About 100 men sailed into Chesapeake Bay and built a fort they called Jamestown. It would prove to be England's first permanent settlement in North America.

Jamestown barely survived its first year. It was located on a swampy peninsula where insects thrived in warm weather. During the first summer, many colonists caught diseases such as malaria, and died.

The colony had another serious problem. Many of the colonists had no intention of doing the hard farmwork needed to grow crops. Those men who came to the colony were not farmers. They were skilled in other trades.

**Sample 2**

When the first colonists arrived, there were no friends to greet them. No houses were ready for them. They had to start from scratch—and I do mean scratch, as in scratching. The early colonists often had to live in huts of branches and dirt, or Indian wigwams, or even caves, and none of those places was bug-proof. And, of course, they had to scratch a living out of the ground.

Later colonists lived in small wooden houses with one or two rooms. Eventually, some lived in fine houses. A few lived in mansions, with beautiful furniture and paintings and dishes and silver. But no one had a bathroom like you have, or electric lights, or a furnace, or running water, or kitchen appliances. And very few people lived in mansions anyway.

**FIGURE 2.5.** A comparison of two American history textbooks. Sample 1 is from Davidson and Stoff (2011); Sample 2 is from Hakim (2003).



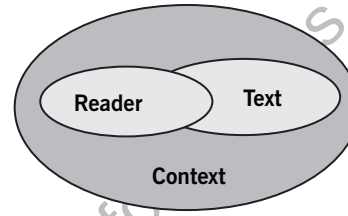
1991). What's more, voice turns writing into something far more enticing for readers.

Our discussion of text points out many of the factors that must be considered in selecting and using a text to develop reading comprehension. First, the text used to teach reading should be at the students' instructional level. Various leveling systems make it easy to find out the readability of many books and match them to individual students. However, don't stop with readability. It is also important to consider the level of meaning, the knowledge demands, the clarity of structure, and the quality of writing. For younger and less adept readers, texts with a clearly defined structure are preferable. While a clear structure benefits young and struggling readers, stronger readers should be challenged to read materials with less transparent text structure (McNamara, Kintsch, Butler-Songer, & Kintsch, 1996).

A final thought about text is really about instruction. Student choice is vital in developing comprehension. When Cathy Collins Block and her

colleagues created and studied successful comprehension intervention programs, they found that choice was an essential factor (Block, Parris, Reed, Whiteley, & Cleveland, 2009). Once the teacher and the students defined the topic or the theme, the students selected one of several books to read. Choice gives students some control over learning, thereby promoting motivation.

## THE CONTEXTS OF READING COMPREHENSION




The final element of comprehension, the *context*, can be defined as the external circumstances surrounding the reading act. Without question, in recent decades there has been an increasing emphasis on the importance of context in comprehension instruction. Much of the increased emphasis on the social context of reading can be traced to the theoretical work of Lev Vygotsky, whose work was introduced in Chapter 1. Context has been conceptualized far more broadly to encompass the numerous ways that it affects a reader's meaning construction.

There are three major assumptions that underlie Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. First, learning happens through social interactions, with language being the tool that enables those interactions. Adults explain and model how to do and think, and the child internalizes the oral language of the adults. Then, the child uses the internalized oral language to guide behavior. For example, imagine a parent teaching a child to make scrambled eggs. The adult explains and models the process (Break the egg over the bowl; beat the eggs completely . . . ). When this language is internalized, the child silently repeats these words to guide his or her actions when the adult is no longer present.

The first Vygotskian assumption connects to the second one—that learning requires a knowledgeable parent, mentor, peer, or teacher. More experienced or knowledgeable people are in a position to help others. This notion, in turn, leads us to the third Vygotskian assumption—the zone of proximal development (ZPD).

At the core of the ZPD is the notion that carefully calibrated support given by more experienced individuals enables learners to accomplish far more than they ever could on their own. At the bottom of the zone is the child's actual developmental level—or what that child can manage individually without help. The rest of the zone represents what the child can do when provided with adequate guidance. Initially, the child needs more support; but later, far less is required as skill develops.

When Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is applied to literacy practices, the social context is front and center (Heath, 1983). Parents, grandparents, siblings, and preschool teachers serve as sources of initial support for young children. By participating with others in early, out-of-school literacy practices, children bring vastly different experiences and knowledge about literacy to school (Snow, 2002, p. 16). When these children enter kindergarten it is the job of the teacher to model and provide the support to move the children from where they are to higher levels of achievement. Teachers, aides, and even other children can provide the necessary support.

Think of the context as a series of concentric rings that expand outward from the reader. The first and most obvious ring surrounding the reader is the classroom—and the messages that a teacher sends about reading instruction. The next ring is the school and school district, which exert an influence on reading above and beyond the classroom (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000). Researchers have clearly documented that the school, and specifically the principal, affect the development of reading ability. Next comes the political climate in which reading instruction takes place. The most obvious political contexts impacting instruction today are No Child Left Behind (2002) and Race to the Top (2011). These political initiatives have prompted the high stakes testing regime that determines the rating of a school, and soon, a teacher's evaluation and compensation. The final ring is the social and cultural context, which spans the home and local neighborhood to the global community.



### *The Classroom*

In this book, we focus on three literacy instructional frameworks: reading literature, reading informational texts to inquire, and reading with a basal reading program. These three frameworks can be found in any classroom. At times students read literature, selecting their own books and sharing with others. Often, students read to learn, using textbooks, trade books, and the Internet to build knowledge. Frequently, students receive their comprehension instruction via a basal reading program, as is the case in 74% of U.S. classrooms (Education Market Research, 2010). We briefly examine each of these contexts to observe how they influence the nature of reading comprehension and its instruction.

#### *Literature-Based Reading Instruction*

The most common model for literature-based instruction is the readers' workshop where students select their own books and read independently. Typically at the beginning of the readers' workshop, the teacher provides a

lesson that introduces an important skill, strategy, or literary concept. Then students read independently or with a partner, work on short-response projects or longer writing tasks. While students are reading, the teacher confers with individuals to assess their needs, discuss problems, provide support, and suggest the next book. Later, students share their reading experiences with each other. Within the literature-based classroom teachers may employ small-group discussion, like literature circles (Daniels, 1996) or book clubs (McMahon & Raphael, 1997), in which students share their thinking and personal responses to texts.

The context of literature-based classrooms is individual choice and personal response. Although this structure is sufficiently flexible to promote various attributes of good comprehension, the emphasis on motivation is what first springs to mind. The teaching and learning of reading strategies is individualized and responds to the needs of the group and the individual. There is no preset sequence of instruction. Strategies may be taught to the whole group or reinforced individually during reading conferences. When functioning at their best, literature-based approaches engage students in ever-deepening cycles of describing, explaining, connecting, interpreting, and judging (Beach & Marshall, 1991).

In a literature-based framework, the teacher does not control the curriculum through a series of texts prescribed by a publisher. Instead the students determine what they want to read within the guidelines established by the teacher. The teacher may develop lists or tubs of leveled books from which the students may choose. He or she may designate themes like friendship, survival, or tolerance that students explore during the school year (Block, Parris, Reed, Whiteley, & Cleveland, 2009). Within these themes, students learn to choose books that match their reading abilities.

Classroom discussions, whether in small groups or with the entire class, constitute an important contextual factor. During discussion, students' social and cultural characteristics, knowledge, and backgrounds come into play as they jointly grapple with meaning and provide unique perspectives. We know that when we see a movie with others and then share our interpretations, we typically leave with deeper understandings than if we had not shared at all. Our views are consolidated or changed by negotiating meaning with individuals with alternative viewpoints. When many minds converge on the same topic, interpretations are likely to become more nuanced and elaborate than when they are developed on our own.

### *Inquiry-Oriented Reading Instruction*

Inquiring to learn creates another context for comprehension instruction. More emphasis is placed on informational text, especially trade books,

periodicals, and the Internet. Novels may be included in the inquiry classroom, especially historical fiction. Novels give depth and voice when facts alone cannot capture a battle, a political fight, or social changes in a given era. In the inquiry classroom, a teacher often begins with a common text that all students read. After the topic has been defined, students choose to read other books, articles, and Internet resources to learn more about a selected topic.

In this instructional framework, the goal of reading is to identify key facts, discern ideas, discuss thinking, and apply new learning. Comprehension strategies are useful cognitive tools in the inquiry classroom because sometimes the informational texts are difficult and the students lack prior knowledge. The teacher may develop strategies with the whole class or work with small groups of students. Students often collaborate. They construct meaning together, sharing perspectives and gaining insight. Students are motivated to learn and evaluate new ideas, not simply to become better readers.

### *Basal Reading Programs*

Basal reading programs follow a routine that is dictated by the pacing of units, the structure of lessons, and the scope and sequence of instructional skills and strategies (Chambliss & Calfee, 1998). Basal reading programs are divided into six or more instructional units per year, which in turn are divided into weekly lessons. Both short literature and informational texts appear in the basal program, but literature predominates, especially in programs published prior to 2008. The goal of the program is to follow the curriculum, finish the lessons and the units, and by doing so, students will make progress in learning to read.

With some variation among programs, the lessons follow a set routine. Each week the teacher engages the students in a read-aloud to develop interest and activate prior knowledge. He or she then teaches a number of phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension skills targeted by the reading program. The students then read two or three selections, one from the main anthology and others from leveled books as the teacher asks page-by-page questions. Toward the end of the week, the teacher reviews previous skills, then moving on to grammar and writing. All this culminates with an end-of-week assessment on the vocabulary and skills covered that week.

Within a basal reading program, comprehension is predominantly about skill and strategy instruction and page-by-page guided reading. One or two skills are taught each week and a few are reviewed. Basal reading programs are less about developing knowledge or fostering motivation, and more about acquiring skills and strategies. This context drives many of the

decisions the teacher makes. It influences the selection of materials because workbook practice takes precedence over extended reading of novels and nonfiction trade books. Skill proficiency takes precedence over personal response to literature. The programs foster a teacher-directed environment, where the teacher does most of the talking and the students respond. Generally speaking, developing students' individual initiative and self-monitored control of the comprehension process are not explicit goals.

### *Looking across Frameworks*

In each reading framework, students sometimes set different purposes or goals for reading. They read for enjoyment, for longer-term learning, for critical evaluation, for gathering information, and for completing assignments. But often, the purpose for reading is dictated by the instructional framework itself. The literature-based framework encourages personal choice and response. Within the inquiry framework many students set personal goals and become deeply engaged with the text. Even within the basal classroom, many students still find the space to engage literature and informational text on their own terms.



## *The School, the District, and the State*

Classroom teachers, especially those in public schools, do not operate as self-employed entrepreneurs; they work within a system that is influenced by the federal government, interpreted by the state, and then put into practice by the school district and their principal. In most public schools, accountability standards create a context for reading instruction that no teacher can ignore. Current political mandates require that all students must be assessed annually in reading and mathematics, starting in third grade. States then establish standards of performance and create assessments to measure these standards. Each school must achieve adequate yearly progress (AYP), which means that currently 86% of all students, including 86% of subgroups like African Americans, Hispanics, and special education students must pass their state test at a proficient level, although waivers to these rules have recently been granted to many states. This creates tremendous pressure especially in schools in high-poverty areas. If a school fails to make AYP, a series of punitive measures are put in place including mandated school reform, transfers of students to better schools, and eventually, total school reorganization. In some states performance on these tests is now linked to teacher evaluations and merit pay.

The instructional response to this political climate is teaching to the test (Shepard, 2010). State-mandated high-stakes tests spawn interim

district tests or benchmark tests that drive data analysis and instructional decisions. The results of these interim assessments cause teachers to focus their work on specific standards (e.g., finding the main idea, or making an inference) until students demonstrate mastery. In fact, a flood of workbooks and test-taking practice books are published specifically to help teachers teach to the test. Schools spend literally hundreds of hours practicing giving tests, practicing test taking, and meeting to discuss test results (Goren, 2010). Thus, the context of reading comprehension becomes the state standards and the specific task of passing the test more than immersing students in activities that build their knowledge, strategies, metacognition, and intrinsic motivation. Because skills development is the dominant feature of the curriculum, the students experience reading as a series of short, unrelated passages and answering questions instead of using longer, more complex trade books and novels for learning. Teaching to the test squeezes out time for the appreciation of literature or reading for inquiry.

This bleak view varies from one public school to another depending on the influence of the principal and other leaders in and outside the school. In some schools the test dictates instructional practices; in others, the test is viewed as important but the leaders believe that a range of instructional practices builds literate students, with tests representing just one genre of instruction (Hornof, 2008).



### *Culture and Society*

At the outer edge of our concentric rings of context is the culture and society in which the students live. Just consider the differences between Miguel's and Brody's neighborhoods. Miguel lives in an upper-middle-class community; Brody resides in a rural, working-class one. Miguel grows up with the clear expectation that he will go to college. His parents read all the time for a variety of reasons. Books, magazines, and newspapers pepper their home. They browse for information on iPads, send e-mails on smart phones, and read novels on their e-book readers.

Brody's family runs a farm on a shoestring budget. Although he is still young, this second grader is expected to enter the family business when he graduates from high school. The adults read little at home, but sometimes they read to Brody. They obtain their news from television and use the Internet regularly to maintain their business accounts and communicate via e-mail. The parents, who are concerned about their farm's viability, want Brody to do well and value education. However, their expectations for him do not extend to higher education. Reading for pleasure and information is not modeled at home compared to Miguel's household. With the lack of available printed texts coupled with his reading difficulties, Brody does

not seek out books as a regular source of pleasure, escape, or information, partly because reading is difficult for him.

The peer group also exerts a strong influence on students' reading attitudes and behavior. Peer groups set their own standards about reading and books. Some elementary children get caught up in the latest book fad—*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1999) or *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (Kinney, 2006)—and urge each other on through competition while marveling at the next book in the series. However, with other groups it is not the norm for students, regardless of ability, to be seen reading or carrying books. If you saw the movie *Stand and Deliver*, the main character required three math textbooks. One book he kept at home, one in study hall, and one in his math classroom. He was willing, eventually eager, to learn math, but he would not carry a book. The book or the backpack would set him apart from his peers and they would then hassle him. Peter Dewitz (coauthor of this book) witnessed the same thing when he taught sixth-grade reading. Students simply would not carry books, even self-selected, attractive paperbacks. When the culture of the school and the culture of the peer group collide, the teacher must sensitively and creatively navigate the gulf between the two by leading children to a literate experience, but not at the expense of alienating them from their culture.

## LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD

The elements of comprehension, the reader, the text, and the context are mutually interdependent. In the first chapter we concentrated primarily on the reader, whereas here we focused more on the text and the context. All are vital to creating a successful comprehension program.

As a teacher of reading comprehension you need to select texts with considerable care. You need to know the characteristics of comprehensible texts so you can match them to the needs of your students. Understanding concepts like genre, text structure, coherence, and voice will help you choose texts that will help your students learn well and develop their comprehension. Understanding texts will also help you plan your comprehension lessons. If you know where and why a text is difficult, you will know when to intervene and how to support your students. The more you understand about texts, the better you will be able to assist your students.

Context plays an important role in the development of reading comprehension. Some social contexts stimulate students' growth in reading, whereas others squelch it. Consider a literature-based classroom where children select their own books and engage in spirited discussions. However, this U.S. classroom, especially in public schools, does not operate

independently of federal reform efforts and political agendas, including the current culture of high-stakes testing and accountability.

Reading comprehension is also affected by out-of-school contexts. The home, the neighborhood, and broader society influence what and how often children read. Although parents and guardians value reading and education, some facilitate it more vigorously than others for varied reasons. When the literacy practices at home are compatible with those in school, learning to read is easier than when the culture of the school and the home or peer group clash. Thus, it is important for any teacher of reading comprehension to know more about the intersecting contexts that encircle a reader and a text.

## APPLICATIONS AND EXPLORATIONS

1. Select three fiction books and examine their readability using three methods: the Fry formula *(www.readabilityformulas.com/fry-graph-readability-formula.php),* the Lexile level *(www.lexile.com),* and the guided reading level (see Fountas & Pinnell, 2009). What do these three systems reveal? You might also enter a portion of the text into the Coh-Metrix system.
2. Select three texts on the same nonfiction topic and make sure one is a textbook. Examine these texts and look at the clarity of their structure, the cohesiveness of the language, the presence or absence of necessary prior knowledge, and the voice of the writer.
3. Find out how high-stakes testing is driving instruction in local public schools. If possible, interview a few public school teachers. See if you can compare the answers of a teacher who works in a high-poverty school to those of a teacher in an upper-middle-class school.
4. Interview a few children from one classroom and find out who reads at home and what they read. Extend that interview by asking students about the reading habits and preferences of their family and friends.





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