

# Comprehension Strategy Instruction: Teaching Narrative Text Structure Awareness

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For more than three decades there has been considerable research on comprehension strategy instruction. The findings point to overwhelming evidence that comprehension strategies can be taught (Block & Pressley, 2002; Pearson & Fielding, 1991; Pressley, 2002, 2006a; RAND, 2002), resulting in “substantial improvements in student understanding of text” (Pressley, 2002, p. 12). However, recent research of fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms shows that comprehension strategy instruction has made little progress since Durkin’s (1978/1979) landmark study. Durkin (1978/1979) found that less than 1% of the reading period was spent teaching comprehension strategies. Two decades later Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, Mistretta-Hampston, and Echevarria (1998) reported that little has changed. Pressley et al. (1998) stated that, in the fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms observed, they “were struck by the almost complete absence of direct instruction about comprehension strategies” (p. 172). Pressley (2006b) reported, “The bottom line is that there is no evidence of children being taught such strategies [comprehension] to the point that they use them in a self-regulated fashion, which is the goal of such instruction” (p. 17). Pressley continued, “Even in the classrooms of otherwise very effective elementary teachers...there is little comprehension strategies instruction occurring” (p. 17).

The following are key findings relating to comprehension and comprehension strategy instruction:

- Many students experience comprehension problems (Cornoldi & Oakhill, 1996; Pressley, 2006a, 2006b).
- Some students require explicit comprehension strategy instruction (Pressley, 2002, 2006a, 2006b).
- Teachers play a critical role in helping pupils develop comprehension strategies. “Good instruction is the most powerful means of promoting the development of proficient comprehenders and preventing reading comprehension problems” (RAND, 2002, p. xvii).
- Good comprehenders use a number of strategies, including activating prior knowledge, monitoring comprehension, generating questions, answering questions, drawing inferences, creating mental imagery, identifying the text structure the writer has used, and creating summaries (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000; Pressley, 2000; Smolkin & Donovan, 2002).
- Research indicates that comprehension strategies should be explicitly taught and modeled long term at all grade levels (Block & Pressley, 2002; Calfee & Patrick, 1995; Gaskins, 2003; Pressley, 2006b; RAND, 2002; Sweet & Snow, 2003).
- Students should practice the strategy with guidance, using many texts, until they have a good understanding of the strategy and how to apply it (Block & Pressley, 2002; Calfee & Patrick, 1995).
- Initially, comprehension strategies can be taught one at a time (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997; NICHD, 2000) to “acquaint students with a strategic process” (Pressley, 2002, p. 19). According to Pressley (2006b, p. 17), the aim, over time, is to teach “a small repertoire of strategies” so children can use them in a “self regulated fashion” to enhance comprehension.

The focus of this article is on how to go about teaching one strategy, narrative text structure awareness, for improving comprehension of narrative text. What is narrative text? Narratives are more than simple lists of sentences or ideas. Narratives are stories. Calfee and Drum (1986) reported that “stories generally tell ‘what happened.’ Who did what to whom and why” (p. 836).

Research suggests that comprehension of narrative text is better when the text is organized to a well-known story grammar (Kintsch, Mandel, & Kozminsky, 1977; Mandler & Johnson, 1977; Thorndyke, 1977). Story grammars are “an attempt to construct a set of rules that can generate a structure for any story” (Rayner &

Pollatsek, 1989, p. 307). Story grammars are rather like the set of grammatical rules that are used to structure sentences. David Rumelhart introduced story grammars in 1975, and they were further developed by Thorndyke (1977) and Mandler and Johnson (1977). Story grammars identify the basic parts of a story and show how these parts tie together to form a well-constructed story.

## Story Grammars Form a Hierarchy

The setting, theme, characters, plot, and resolution are located at, or near, the top of the story grammar hierarchy. The more specific details such as subgoal, attempt, and outcome, are located lower in the hierarchy. There are many different story grammars for different stories (Mandler & Johnson, 1977; Rumelhart, 1975; Stein & Glenn, 1979; Thorndyke, 1977). It is not within the scope of this article to explore the various grammars. Similarities do exist, however, among stories in terms of structure (e.g., that the setting, theme, plot, and resolution are at the top of the story grammar hierarchy).

## Are Story Grammars Important to Classroom Teachers?

Story grammars are very helpful. They provide an overall structure for teaching narrative text structure awareness. According to Schmitt and O'Brien (1986), "Story grammars provide teachers with an organizational framework to enhance children's interactions with stories" (p. 5). Story grammar research provides teachers with an excellent tool for teaching narrative text structure awareness. Teaching pupils about story grammars and how stories are structured will help them to comprehend better. Story grammar research moves the teacher away from general explanations of story structure (e.g., that stories have a beginning, middle, and end) to the more specific (e.g., that stories have characters, a theme, and a plot).

There are a number of interventions that have instructed students in the structure of narrative text with the aim of improving comprehension. Baumann and Bergeron (1993) investigated the effects of story map instruction on narrative comprehension of grade 1 students. Results showed that the grade 1 students who were instructed in the components of stories (e.g.,

characters, place, time, problem, and solution) outperformed students who were not.

Idol (1987) taught grade 3 and 4 students to use a story mapping strategy to improve comprehension of narratives. The story map instruction focused on characters, time, place, problem, goal, action, and outcome. Results showed significant positive effects on passages read for grade 3 and 4 students.

Calfee and Patrick (1995) also reported that grade 1 students can be taught strategies such as character analysis, plot analysis, and how to identify the theme and setting in order to enhance story comprehension. Students can also be taught how to analyze episodes. According to Calfee and Patrick (1995), "For the first-grader, the boundaries [episodes] in *The Three Little Pigs* are easy to spot. By making the structure clear and giving names to the elements, the foundation is laid for coping in high school" (p. 78). The following 6-year-old demonstrates that pupils as early as grade 1 are able to gain an understanding of the structure of narrative text. As the 6-year-old put it,

What you have to do with a story is, you analyze it; you break it into parts. You figure out the characters, how they're the same and different. And the plot, how it begins with a problem and goes on until it is solved. Then you understand the story better, and you can even write your own. (Calfee, 1991, p. 178)

As children progress through school, the more complex components of the characters (e.g., their influence on plot), the setting (e.g., the influence of setting on other components of the story), the plot (e.g., the influence of plot on theme, characters, or setting or identifying the subplot within the main plot), and the theme (e.g., how theme is shaped by characters) can be taught.

Most children enter school with a basic understanding of narratives (i.e., beginning, middle, and end), but they are less likely to know that stories have a more elaborate structure (i.e., setting, characters, plot, theme; Calfee & Patrick, 1995; Dymock & Nicholson, 1999). It is this more elaborate structure that children should be taught. We know that students who have a good understanding of narrative text structure are advantaged. Research suggests that during the early grades, story comprehension is a significant component of academic performance. What's more, teaching students the structure of narrative text from grade 1 provides them with a foundation for comprehending the more complex narrative text encountered at upper primary and high school (e.g., novels,

Shakespeare). As Calfee and Patrick (1995) stated, “Instruction in the narrative domain leads students to a deeper understanding of how narratives are built, and gives them a technical language for talking about both comprehension and composition” (p. 77).

## What Should Students Be Taught?

Students should be taught

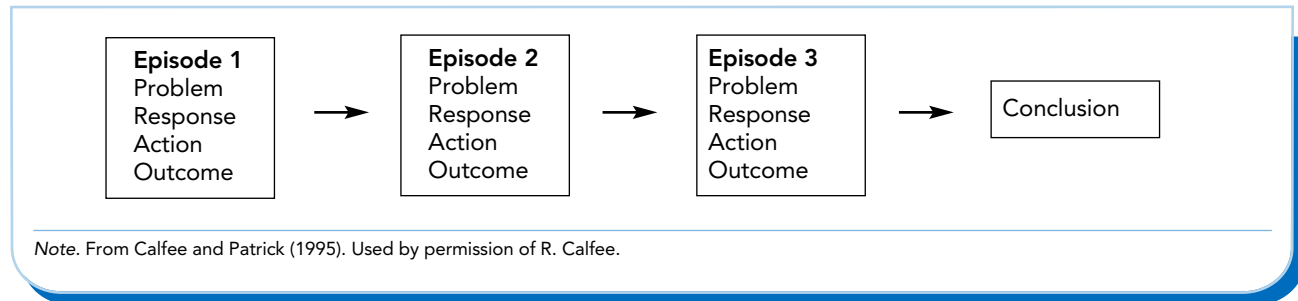
- That the setting establishes where and when the story takes place.
- That characters can be classified as major and minor.
- How to analyze individual characters, focusing on their appearance and personality, and how to compare and contrast characters.
- How to analyze the overall plot and that it consists of four parts: **Problem**. What is the problem in the sto-

ry? **Response**. How do characters respond to the problem? **Action**. What do characters do about the problem? **Outcome**. What is the outcome?

- How to analyze individual episodes (i.e., subplot). Diagrams are used to enable the reader to visualize the episode analysis (see Figure 1).
- That the theme is the message that underlies the story. The theme often explains the motives of the characters or comments on social relationships or society in general. The theme is often left to the reader to interpret. Ask your pupils, “Why did the author write the story?”

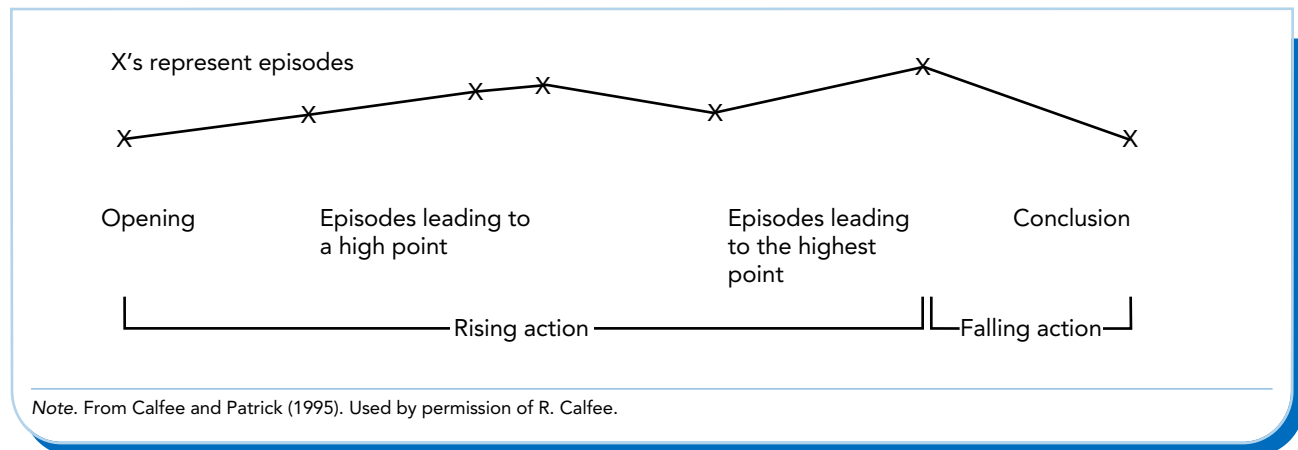
Narratives can also be graphed. The story graph visually represents how the plot develops, showing the high and low action points of the story as it progresses over time. Figure 2 illustrates a common pattern.

**Figure 1**  
Analysis of Episodes



Note. From Calfee and Patrick (1995). Used by permission of R. Calfee.

**Figure 2**  
Story Graph



Note. From Calfee and Patrick (1995). Used by permission of R. Calfee.

Figure 3  
Story Web

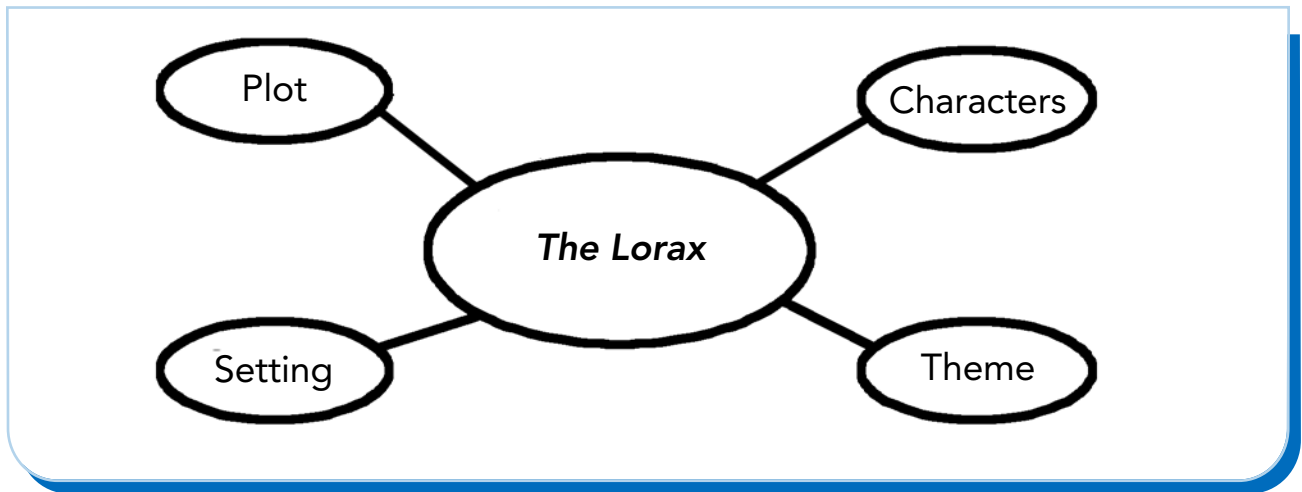


Table 1  
Student Contributions

	Lorax	Once-ler
Appearance	Small Brown Animal Short Old Hairy	Long green arms Yellow eyes Beady eyes Green body
Personality	Environmentalist Caring Concerned about others Spoke for the trees, birds, animals, and fish Angry Sad Pushy Hassled the Once-ler Voice: sharp and bossy The voice of conscience	Evil Greedy Selfish Money hungry Loved making money Cunning Sly Creative, but for the worse Didn't care about others Responsible for the "mess" but didn't care until it was too late

Story webs can also be created (see Figure 3). A story web is like a word web where the terms defining the structure of a story surround the title.

Narrative comprehension strategies (i.e., characters, setting, plot, and theme) bring narratives to life. For example, a fourth-grade teacher can begin a reading lesson by focusing on the two main characters in *The Lorax* (Seuss, 1971):

Today we are going to read *The Lorax* by Dr. Seuss. *The Lorax* is a story about what the earth was like many years

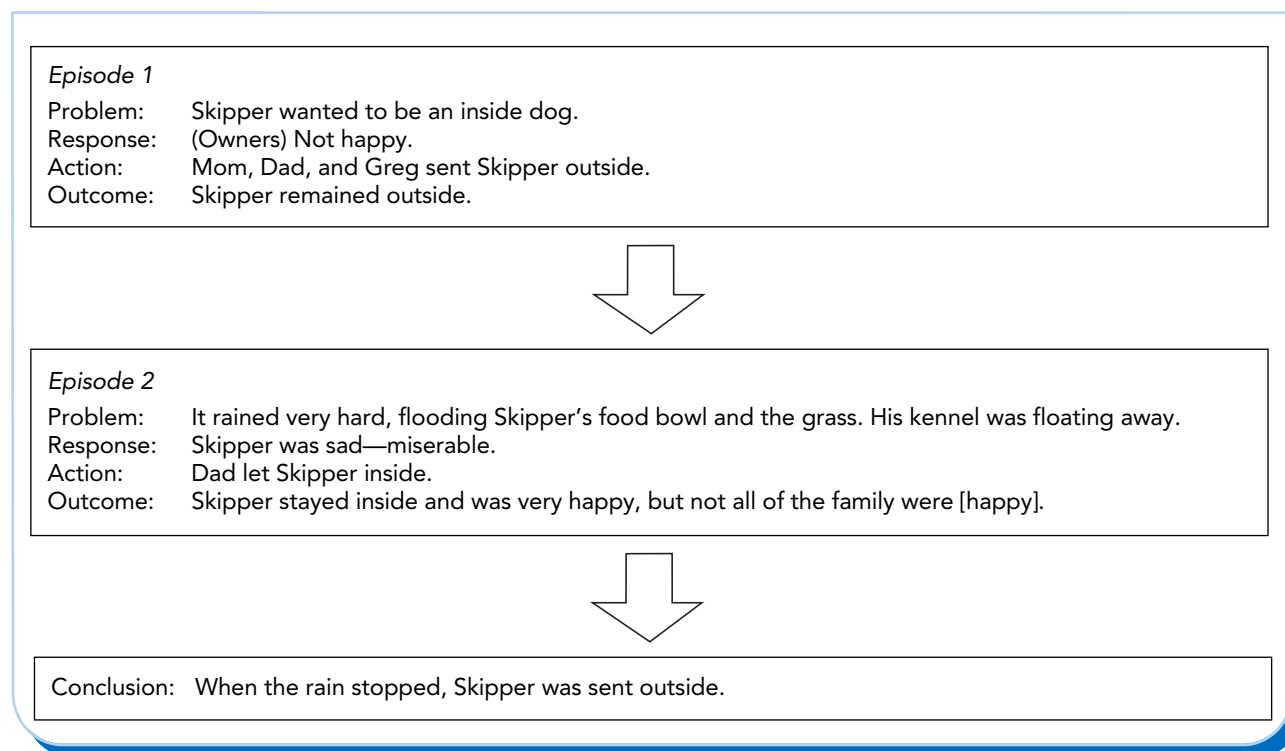
ago and what it is like today. There are two main characters in this story, the Once-ler—a go-getter businessman, and the Lorax—a conservationist. As you read the *The Lorax* I want you to think about the two main characters, the Once-ler and the Lorax. How would you describe their appearance and personality to someone who has not read the book?

*The Lorax* (Seuss, 1971) is one of many narratives that can be used, at a number of grade levels, to teach narrative text structure awareness. A group of 10-year-

**Table 2**  
Character Weave—*The Lorax*

Character	Physical appearance	Attitude toward the environment	Feelings about others	Modern day equivalent
Lorax				
Once-ler				

**Figure 4**  
Episode Analysis for *No, Skipper!*



old students analyzed the structure of *The Lorax* (Seuss, 1971), and they agreed that the setting of *The Lorax* (Seuss, 1971) is the earth many years ago and today and that the two main characters, the Lorax and the Once-ler, differ significantly. The Lorax, for example, is hairy, short, brownish, caring, and an environmentalist. While the Once-ler has yellow beady eyes, long arms, a green body, and is greedy, evil, cunning, and money hungry. During this discussion, the students’ contributions were recorded on the whiteboard (see Table 1). Their plot analysis found that pollution is destroying the earth and the homes of all who in-

habit it (i.e., the problem). The two characters respond to the problem in different ways. The Once-ler simply does not care, but the Lorax is mad, annoyed, frustrated, and very concerned for the animals, fish, and birds. The students determined the action in the book to be that the Once-ler continues to pollute the earth and that the Lorax endeavors to convince the Once-ler to stop. The outcome is that the water and air are so polluted that animals, birds, and fish must leave. In time, the Once-ler concedes he made a mistake. He offers the reader hope. The students conclude that the theme of the book is that failing to look

after the environment has disastrous results. The future of the earth is in our hands.

The Lorax and Once-ler can also be compared and contrasted on a number of variables. For example, their physical appearance, attitude toward the environment, feelings about others, and modern day equivalents can be compared and contrasted (see Table 2).

As well as learning about plot analysis, pupils should also be taught how to analyze individual episodes. *No, Skipper!* (Holt, 2002) is about a dog named Skipper and is written at about the 6-year-old level. Skipper enjoys playing inside, but his owners see things differently. The episode analysis in Figure 4 is based on *No, Skipper!*

Narrative text structure strategies can be used with other comprehension strategies in a readers' repertoire of reading comprehension strategies (see Pressley, 2000), including activating prior knowledge (e.g., "*The Lorax* is set in the countryside. What can you tell me about the landscape of rural America?"); constructing mental images (e.g., "Close your eyes and visualize acres of grass, trees, ponds, animals playing, and birds singing. Close your eyes and visualize the story graph."), and summarizing (e.g., "We have discussed the Lorax's personality and appearance. Now let's summarize these characteristics.").

## A More Elaborate Understanding of Stories

Narrative strategy instruction gives students a more elaborate understanding of stories. It is one of a number of comprehension strategies children should be taught to use. Research shows that students who have a good understanding of narrative text structure have fewer problems comprehending this text type (Dymock & Nicholson, 1999). Research also suggests that many students require explicit instruction in how to comprehend narrative text (Calfée & Patrick, 1995; Smolkin & Donovan, 2002). While some children are able to figure out the structure of narrative text on their own, there are others who are not so lucky. Teachers play an important role in assisting students to develop a good understanding of narrative text structure awareness.

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