One day during my recent sabbatical, I was working with a small group of eighth-grade students who were reading aloud a passage in Ouida Sebestyen's *Words by Heart*. In the passage, the main character discovers her father's dead body. Students pronounced the words with little trouble. But when I asked them basic comprehension questions, most had no idea what had happened.

"Who died in this passage?" I asked.

Most looked at me blankly. "Somebody died?" A few had recognized that there was a dead body in the scene but thought it was a different character. Clearly they had read the words, but they had not put the words together into a mental picture of the action.

Their comprehension problems with this passage were typical of their problems throughout the book. At another point in the novel, I asked students to read a passage with dialogue, with each reader taking the part of a character. Most were able to read the words, but many had trouble sorting out who was speaking.

A few weeks later, their teacher had the same students read aloud a passage from *The Diary of Anne Frank* (Goodrich and Hackett). Although the vocabulary was at least as difficult, the setting was far more distant, and the issues were more complex, students had no problems with comprehension. Even the poorest readers found their parts easily because a play clearly labels each speaker. More surprising, even the weakest students were not only able to answer basic, factual questions about who was doing what but were also able to make much more sophisticated inferences about how the characters would interact in the future, and they were able to identify with the characters and express personal reactions about their experiences.

I knew from experience that students with low reading levels often responded better to drama than to narrative. I had noted that drama allows students with kinesthetic and social learning styles to make use of their theatrical talents and that the short parts make reading aloud less painful for poor readers.

However, I also noticed the difference between the grammatical sophistication of the novel and the play. A play clearly labels for the reader the characters, dialogue, action, and scene changes. The novel embeds this information in complex sentences spoken by a narrator who may or may not be one of the actors. The difference between students' comprehension of the novel and the drama was to a great extent the result of the greater complexity of the grammatical structures used in adolescent novels.

**Grammatical Complexity Increases Reading Difficulty**

This experience suggested to me that a significant component of reading difficulty for middle school students may be genre-specific grammatical complexity. Additional observations and work with struggling readers supported my conclusion that many
struggling readers were able to read the words of the assigned texts or to sound out unfamiliar words, but they had difficulty putting the words together with grammatical and punctuation cues to construct meaning. Although these grammatical structures are common conventions in fiction writing, they are rarely used in conversation, television, or other genres most students are exposed to outside of school.

**Categories of Difficulty**

In my observation of secondary school students with reading difficulties, I have found that difficulties with using grammar to construct meaning fit into three categories. The reader’s primary task changes with the problem to be addressed.

First, many struggling readers conceive of the task of reading as calling words, not making meaning. Their entire focus is on pronouncing the words correctly, and they are satisfied that they have fulfilled their task if they get through the passage with all of the words pronounced. For these students, the primary task is to shift the focus to making meaning.

Second, there are students who are trying to construct meaning but miss important cues. When asked to reread a passage, they understand the grammar and can construct the passage correctly. The teacher needs to help students develop an understanding of story grammar and recognize the sentence grammar cues that are important in constructing a narrative.

Third, there are specific grammatical or punctuation structures that are needed for reading narrative that are not needed in ordinary conversation or in reading drama. Students may need direct instruction in these grammatical elements and how to use them to make meaning.

Following are descriptions of the problems I have observed and teaching activities and suggestions for helping students to master the skills they need to read more effectively.

**Developing Oral Interpretation Skills**

The most common problem I found with students was that even though they knew the grammar, they were not using it to construct meaning. All of their attention was focused on reading the correct words rather than on making meaning out of the passage. Focusing their attention on grammar became another distraction from the meaning-making process. Before students could pick up grammar cues, they needed to learn that their purpose was constructing meaning, not calling words.

The most pernicious culprit in developing the habit of word-calling rather than reading for meaning is round-robin bad reading. Good oral reading can be helpful for students with reading difficulty, but most oral reading I hear in schools is of atrocious quality, providing horrible models of reading. Children in lower tracks may spend most of the day sitting while someone mumbles through a textbook, making the meaning less, rather than more, clear. Oral reading has many valuable functions in a literature class, but students should never hear models of bad reading.

Teaching good oral reading skills is a powerful tool for teaching reading skills, grammar, and punctuation. Reading aloud well forces a reader to hear the many voices in a piece of literature and learn to use punctuation and grammar cues to clarify meaning and for emphasis. A good reader hears the voices of the various characters and the attitudes their characters reveal. Few students develop an effective oral reading style without training.

The most important steps in training good oral readers are to help students understand how effective reading makes meaning clear and to help students develop standards for good oral reading. It is important to illustrate and discuss techniques that a good reader uses to create character and to involve the listener in the action. Tapes of professional readers can be helpful. Once they understand the characteristics of good oral reading, students can help construct a rubric or checklist to evaluate their effectiveness as oral readers.

In learning ways that oral interpretation helps create meaning, students discover that punctuation and grammar cues guide the reader. With preparation, they learn that the oral interpreter must ensure that the listener hears changes of scene and speaker.

When students are going to read aloud in class, give them an opportunity to prepare. You can assign passages to small groups or pairs at the beginning of the period and give them five minutes of preparation before you begin activities that require oral reading.
for the whole class. Figure 1 includes a useful strategy for preparation. You might post this strategy on the wall or give it to students as a handout.

In preparing an oral reading, students learn to pay attention to grammar and punctuation cues that are important in making meaning.

Developing Metacognition

In addition to learning to construct meaning as they read, students need to develop their metacognition by learning to check their evolving understanding of events in a story, recognizing when something is not making sense, and using reading strategies to check for missed clues.

One technique for helping students become aware that they are missing cues is to appoint a summarizer in a reading group. After students have read a meaningful passage or are at a scene change, the summarizer retells the story. The rest of the group has the opportunity to challenge the summary if there is a point on which they disagree. To make a challenge, they have to go back to the passage and show what they interpreted differently and why.

Another strategy to help the teacher recognize when some students are missing ideas is to use a true-false voting technique. Give each student two 3” × 5” cards, one with a T written on it and one with an F. Ask true-false questions about the points that you think students may have misunderstood. You will have instant feedback on students’ understanding. It is important that students recognize this activity as a way of clarifying problems and not as a way of catching bad readers. On points where there is disagreement, refer students to the text and ask for interpretations. Do not ask students who had the wrong answer to defend their answers unless they choose to.

Many problems of missed grammar cues can be cleared up on a second reading. Sometimes students consistently miss a certain type of cue such as time signals or pronoun references. If so, they need to learn how to find those cues. Also, sometimes discussion will show that there were rules of grammar and punctuation that students were unfamiliar with that needed to be taught or reviewed.

The following are meaning-construction tasks in adolescent literature that sometimes require some additional work on understanding and using grammatical constructions. I have also included activities to help students develop those skills.

Constructing the Characters

One of the first tasks when reading a novel is to construct the characters. Writers for middle school use complex grammatical elements such as participles and absolutes, but I did not find that students had understood these constructions. The problem struggling students usually had was that today’s authors do not put all of the information about characters into a nice, neat paragraph describing the character. The reader has to put together an image of a character over several pages by connecting pronoun and general noun references to names, actions, and bits of description.

For example, in Sharon Flake’s *The Skin I’m In*, the reader meets the two main characters as pronouns—“I” and “her.” For five sentences, we have only pronouns, and not until the fifth sentence does the reader get the nouns *freak* and *teacher* that begin to label the characters. In the next paragraph describing the character. The reader has to put together an image of a character over several pages by connecting pronoun and general noun references to names, actions, and bits of description.

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Using Textual Clues

The following activity illustrates the process that a good reader must use to put together clues to create a character. Use this activity with the passage that
first introduces a group of characters before students have read this section of the book.

Before class, draw on the board generic body outlines for each of the characters in the passage you will be reading.

Assign each row or group of students a character’s name. Ask each group to identify an artist, a writer, and consultants, making sure each group member has a role. The artist and writer will come to the board. The consultants will listen carefully, make notes, and one will quietly walk to the board to give advice. They may also ask you to stop or to reread a sentence.

Read aloud the section of the book in which we meet new characters. As you read, pause periodically to let the groups give directions to their artist about details that should be added and changes that should be made in the drawing. The writer should write the words or phrases that have shaped the impression beside or below the drawing.

After everyone has finished, have each group present its drawing of the character and defend it by explaining how the words or phrases shaped the image. The other groups can challenge drawings if they disagree with the interpretations. Discuss the guesses (or inferences) the artist had to make to fill in details. What did the artist base these inferences on? Were there any questions about which character a particular description referred to?

At this point, it may be helpful to discuss the kinds of words and grammatical structures the writer used to paint the picture of the character to help students become aware of the way grammatical choices help create an author’s style. For example, in Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, Mildred Taylor uses a number of participles in her character descriptions, and it may be helpful to give students the label for this construction if they don’t already know it.

**Constructing Dialogue**

I found that weak readers often had difficulty with dialogue. Reading dialogue in a narrative requires two skills. First, a reader needs to know the punctuation conventions of dialogue. Second, the reader needs to be able to mentally envision the conversation, because most writers do not continue writing “Maleeka said” and “Miss Saunders said” in a long string of dialogue. After the first sentences, a reader has to keep track of whose turn it is to talk, and in a conversation of three people, the reader often has to know the characters well enough to make inferences about who would make each comment.

I found that students not only had difficulty constructing a scene but also did not fully understand the grammatical conventions that give the readers clues about who is speaking. Most knew that a passage enclosed in quotation marks is dialogue and that “he says” or “she says” explains who the speaker is. However, not all students knew that a new paragraph usually signals a new speaker, and that a second piece of dialogue in the same paragraph is usually by the same speaker. A few students confused the person being addressed with the speaker or assumed that the name most nearly preceding the spoken text was the speaker.

Because students did not remember all of the rules of dialogue writing, we reviewed them from the grammar text and I posted them on the wall.

We practiced reading dialogue by assigning parts and blocking the scene with the characters standing or sitting in the appropriate places to help students envision the scene. If a student missed a cue, instead of correcting him or her, I asked, “What clues do we have about who is speaking?”

We also practiced examining clues by previewing a passage and noting the clues about who was speaking which lines. I occasionally photocopied the passages students were going to be working with and had them annotate the passage, noting the speaker in front of the passage and marking the clues that show who is speaking.

**Constructing Time Sequences**

Children’s stories usually take place in simple chronological order. First, Little Red Riding Hood gets her basket and sets out into the woods; then the wolf appears; then Little Red Riding Hood goes to grandmother’s; and so on.

As a reader gets older and develops a more sophisticated inner life, the literature he or she selects includes more scenes that the characters remember or flashbacks to previous times. A good reader picks up the grammatical clues that indicate when the time and scene have changed, but these are clues that weak readers sometimes miss.

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_Barbara Stanford_
The eighth-grade students reading Sebestyen’s *Words by Heart* were confused by a paragraph in which the main character discovered that her father was dead. A clue to his death was that he had a wound that had been healing. Several students argued that he had to be alive because he had a wound that was healing. They did not realize that *had been healing* signaled that the wound was no longer healing.

Writers of adolescent literature use verb forms precisely to indicate time sequences and to show actions in ways that are not common in ordinary conversation. Not only are the precise grammatical forms not always the same in speech but ways of thinking about time are also culturally specific. In science-based cultures, time is relentlessly linear and every event can and must be carefully sequenced on a mental timeline. Not all cultures divide up time segments in this way. In some cases, students first need to understand the concept of a particular time segment before they can understand the tense that describes it.

For example, explanation of the grammatical construction “had been healing” may need to begin with an exploration of events in their experience that “had been happening.”

If students have missed clues about verb forms, they can be asked to note passages where they find examples of the confusing form and then to discuss how the verb tense affects the meaning of the scene. They can also practice writing the kinds of events that require the form.

**Signal Words**

Writers signal scene changes, time, and place with adverbs, prepositions, and subordinating conjunctions as well as with verbs. I found that students had little trouble understanding these words but that they often overlooked them in constructing meaning because they did not see their importance. They were like a driver who knows perfectly well what a stop sign means but doesn’t know to watch for a sign when approaching a corner. Students need to learn that recognizing scene changes is important for constructing narrative and then learn the signals writers use for scene changes.

If your students are doing literature circles, you can assign one student the role of scene-change observer and let the student choose the strategy for keeping track of scene changes. The scene-change observer alerts the group when the scene has changed and points out the technique the author has used to show the scene change.

Students can also individually or as a class draw a timeline starting from the time of the first scene but leaving room for prior events, such as flashbacks and memories, that can be shown on a second timeline below the main one or in a different color. A timeline made by the whole class can be done on butcher paper on one side of the room or on the top of the chalkboard. Students can do individual timelines by taping pieces of paper together. As each new scene is encountered, it can be shown on the timeline, and students can note the clues that show the scene has changed.

**Grammar and Literature**

The examples and teaching suggestions in this article focus on problems I observed of middle school and high school students reading several years below grade level. However, as students gain skills in using grammar cues to construct meaning, they also usually encounter new genres and new levels of difficulty. Students may encounter problems unraveling grammar, particularly when reading poetry, literature of previous centuries, and literature of other cultures. Many of the strategies can also be used in those situations.

**Works Cited**


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