chapter
ONE

Comprehension

WHAT IS COMPREHENSION, AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

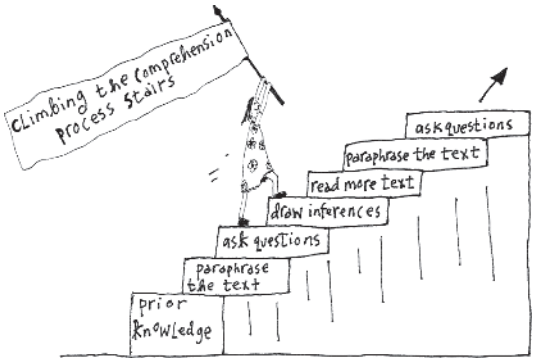
In *When Kids Can't Read: What Teachers Can Do*, Kylene Beers calls comprehension "both a product and a process,"[1] which makes it a little tricky. You go through the process and arrive at a destination or create something. The possibilities for getting stuck or creating something imperfect are endless. But if we know how the process works, we can avoid obstacles (or overcome them), end up somewhere rewarding, and create something powerful.

Reading, writing, and oral fluency are the purest and most common expressions of comprehension. When students read, write, or speak, they are demonstrating how much they comprehend. Comprehension and literacy are thus inextricably intertwined. This explains why the Achievement Gap is, in fact, a *literacy* gap. Students who struggle to comprehend also struggle to perform in every academic area: they fail to absorb information, fail to solve problems, and fail to express ideas effectively. So here's the bottom line: no matter what grade or subject you teach, you need to understand the comprehension process and you need to teach literacy.

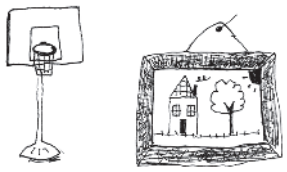
MY THEORY OF COMPREHENSION

I know I'm not the first person to theorize about reading comprehension. Plenty of people have written on this topic. Nevertheless, I feel compelled to share my own theory. I think of it as "Climbing the Comprehension Process Stairs."

Let me explain this more fully. And please note: this is a theory of comprehension *in general*, not just reading comprehension. It applies to listening, seeing, smelling, touching—everything you do in order to try to understand. So, you encounter a "text," and *that "text" could be a picture, a song, a sign, a book, or even the defense on a basketball court*.



As you approach the "text," the first thing you do—a thing you will repeatedly do—is access your prior knowledge or skills that relate to this "text." As illustrated in the Comprehension Process Stairs, your prior knowledge and skills might include previous experiences, the context, texts previously read or academic content knowledge, and knowledge of conventions such as genre, grammar, and syntax. You use your prior knowledge and skills first to orient yourself to the "text," then in your initial attempt to "paraphrase" it. *In other words, you begin to use what you know to put the "text" into your own words.* If the text involves words, you will need to unpack the vocabulary, unpack the grammar and syntax, and draw inferences from idioms. (More on paraphrasing in a moment.)



• If the "text" is a basketball game and you're a point guard dribbling up-court, you would use your prior knowledge of defenses (countless hours of practice) to observe how the defense is setting up and think, "Oh, they're playing man-to-man."

• If you're reading a story and it says, "The man fell down," you would use your prior knowledge of vocabulary to paraphrase that to "He collapsed." PS: Some people think paraphrasing means "simplifying." I prefer to think of it as "putting it in your own words, using the strongest vocabulary possible."

Once you've paraphrased this bit of "text," you immediately ask questions about it. These questions are also based on your prior knowledge and skills. Some people do this so quickly that they don't even notice they've done it. By contrast, many

students don't do it very well, if at all. Why? If you lack prior knowledge and skills relating to the "text," you don't know what to ask. Also, if you struggle to paraphrase the text (if it's figuratively or literally Greek to you), it will be difficult to generate questions other than "What does *that* mean?" Even if you are able to paraphrase the text, if you don't have frequent practice in explaining things logically, you might not think of the most logical questions to ask. When people wring their hands about how "kids can't think critically," *part of the problem is that students lack background knowledge and part is that they lack experience in questioning and explaining*.

• In the case of our point guard, the most logical question would be, "Which offensive play should I call?"

• In the case of the Falling Man, you would wonder, "Why did he collapse?"

The next step—again, often done at lightning speed—is to use your prior knowledge and skills in an attempt to answer the question. If you've seen a text like this before or are highly familiar with the situation or content, the answer might be limited or obvious. Or it might require some reasoning as you sort through what you know. *The result of this thinking (also called "extended reasoning") is an inference*.

• The point guard might think, "Well, we only have three different offensive plays to use against a man-to-man defense, and the first one didn't work, so let me call our second play and see if we score."

• In wondering why the Falling Man collapsed, I would quickly recall my various experiences with falling: on basketball courts (of course), doing aikido (a martial art I tried for a few months in which the sensei told me I was "good at falling"—no doubt from basketball), falling down a flight of stairs, seeing a man have a seizure at a football game, and tripping over my sister's roller skates in our bedroom. After I generated these memories, I would reason that the "text" didn't say anything about the guy tripping over anything, and I know that healthy people don't usually fall down for no reason, so I would draw the conclusion that "he must have been sick."

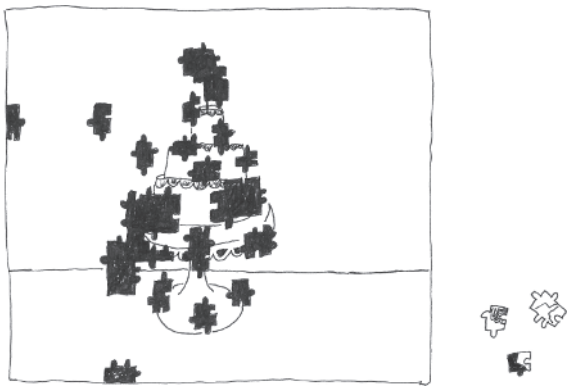
The inference that we draw takes the form of an explanation, and it becomes an assumption that we hold onto—that is, part of our "prior" knowledge—until it is challenged by new information. PS: In the next section, we'll look at how inferences and explanations are two sides of the same coin.

• In the game, if the play worked, we'd use it again. If it didn't, we'd try something else the next time down the court.

• If the sentence after "The man fell down" said, "He should have bought those sneakers with the Velcro straps," you would correct your assumption. But if you don't know what *Velcro* is, you might not. Students who encounter unfamiliar vocabulary and lack word-attack skills or root knowledge tend to skip over what they don't understand. So they would continue to believe that the Falling Man was sick. Incidentally, *this problem—walking around with faulty assumptions—infects students in every subject*. In math, if you're firmly convinced that 5 times 5 is 20, even if you are able to read a word problem and set up the correct formula involving 5 times 5, you will still arrive at the wrong solution. This is why it's so important to teach *accurate* content. As Doug Lemov urges in *Teach Like a Champion*, we must be vigilant when conducting class discussions: "Right is Right. Set and defend a high standard of correctness in your classroom."[2] If we allow students to walk away with incorrect assumptions, we are setting them up for failure.

With each new bit of "text," we go through the process over and over: access prior knowledge and skills, paraphrase using this knowledge, question using this knowledge, and draw inferences.

For any given "text," all of our inferences add up to a main idea, which should be expressed as a complete sentence. In nonfiction, the main idea is an *argument* (such as, "Smoking is horrible for your health"). In fiction or narratives, the main idea is a theme or message (such as, "Some people will do crazy things for love."). One reason why so many students struggle with main idea is that they have missed inferences along the way. So their overall comprehension of the text is like a jigsaw puzzle with so many missing pieces that they can't see the Big Picture.



A quick note about "theme": Some people use the terms *theme* and *topic* interchangeably, and students become confused. One way to

remember the difference is that topics are often single words or phrases, while themes are expressed as complete sentences. "Love" is a topic. "Love conquers all" is a theme. It's actually easier to write about a theme because you can answer the questions How? and Why? and write something compelling. Topic-oriented writing generates as much excitement as a grocery list.

For more information on theme-based writing, check out Chapter Nine, on Teaching with Novels, which includes a section on Novels in English Language Arts: Literary Response Paper Writing Guide.

WHY BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE IS *SO* IMPORTANT

If you think about my theory of comprehension, it explains why we hear different things every time we listen to a song; why we are able to pay more attention to the use of language in, say, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*,[3] the second or third (or fifteenth) time we read it; and why Kelly Gallagher (the author of *Deeper Reading*) and his daughters see and understand different things while watching the same baseball game.[4] The more we know about the "text," the more deeply we are able to "read" it. We bring our different experiences, skills, and knowledge to the "text" and see it through our unique lenses; we react to it in different ways. In short, our experiences shape our expectations and our actions. We look for different things and ask different questions based on what we know, so we do different things with the "text." For example, whenever I play basketball with guys, I know they'll try frantically to block my first shot, so I always fake first. But you don't need to have years of experience. If you open *Me Talk Pretty One Day* by David Sedaris[5] and the first essay makes you laugh out loud, you'll expect the rest of the essays to do the same.

Looking at it from another angle, this theory of comprehension also explains why five-year-olds can't read Russian novels. One day when I was in sixth grade, combing through my father's library, I found his copy of Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*.[6] When I opened the book, I chuckled. As a young child, I'd circled all of the words I knew on the first few pages: mostly the words *the* and *and*. At age twelve, I tried again to read those pages and decided the book still looked too complicated. A few years later, studying it in college, I loved it. What happened?

Lacking prior knowledge (in this case, about vocabulary in general and Russian surnames in particular), children struggle to paraphrase the text. Most of their questions about *The Idiot* would be along the lines of "What does this mean? What

does that mean?'' and they would draw no conclusions. Having accumulated no inferences or insights, they would fail to arrive at any main idea. In short, they would have no idea what the text meant. Out of frustration, feeling stupid, they would give up.

Unfortunately, this same problem befalls many middle and high school students. It begins when they are very young. As Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley discovered, some children—from an early age—are exposed to *many* words, while others are exposed to *few*.[7] In a study of forty-two families from three different socioeconomic categories (professional, working class, and welfare), they observed and tape-recorded family interactions for an hour a month for thirty months. They found that children from the wealthiest families heard over 1,500 more words each hour, on average, than children from the poorest families (2,153 versus 616). Over a four-year period, this amounts to an estimated thirty-two-million-word gap.[8]

They also found that children mirrored their parents' vocabulary resources, use of language, and interaction styles. In fact, about nine out of every ten words in each child's vocabulary consisted of words also recorded in their parents' vocabularies.[9]

Vocabulary knowledge is clearly a key component of the background knowledge that enables comprehension. In order to paraphrase text, we must recognize words and decipher unfamiliar vocabulary. Few would dispute the correlation between vocabulary and comprehension. Indeed, Walker, Greenwood, Hart, and Carta's follow-up to Hart and Risley's study[10] of twenty-nine of the original forty-two children found that children's rate of vocabulary growth and vocabulary use at age three was strongly associated with their grade 3 standardized test scores in receptive vocabulary, listening, speaking, semantics, syntax, and reading comprehension. In short, those with a smaller vocabulary at *age* three were still struggling with reading five years later, in *grade* 3.

The problem is not merely a word gap. It's also an *explanation* gap.

Exposure to fewer words means that one hears fewer examples of complex thinking: fewer sentences, fewer questions, and fewer explanations of ideas or arguments. Hart and Risley noted that a family's language style affected the amount of language spoken because ''explaining alternatives takes many more words than straightforward directives.'' They found that parents who explained more also asked more questions and encouraged their children to ask more questions that the parents then had to answer.[11]

In other words, children exposed to more words are also exposed to more examples of *logical thinking*. The reverse is also true. Children who communicate with others who speak less have fewer opportunities to (1) build fluency, (2) express and react to ideas, and (3) ask questions and figure things out. In short, they have fewer opportunities to *practice comprehension and logical thinking*.

So, we have work to do. We have to build background knowledge and give students frequent practice in explaining in order to strengthen their ability to comprehend.

DOGGIE BAG

1. Why is the Achievement Gap a *Literacy* Gap and in fact also an *Explanation* Gap?
2. What does the Comprehension Process entail, and how will you teach it to your students?
3. Why is background knowledge *so* important?

KEY CRITICAL READING SKILL 1: PARAPHRASING

You may be wondering why I have included the "four key critical *reading* skills" in the chapter on comprehension, when the next chapter is about reading. Although these four skills are reading skills, they are integral to the comprehension process, and they are also critical *thinking* skills. Take paraphrasing, for example. In combination with accessing background knowledge, it represents the first step toward understanding any "text," whatever that text might be. Because it is a thinking skill, it manifests itself in various forms of expression. Many of us paraphrase without even realizing that we are doing it—whether we're reading, writing, listening, speaking, smelling .... That's because we've had so much practice. But for many students—whether you call them beginning, struggling, "dependent,"[12] or "developing" readers[13]—paraphrasing is *not* automatic. And if you can't translate what you see, hear, smell, or otherwise sense into your own thoughts, you can't do much else with the text.

Reading both requires and enhances thinking. So when we work on our reading skills, we strengthen our thinking skills. Sadly, many students believe that good readers are simply born that way. They need to hear the message that reading involves a set of skills that they can practice and become good at. As you introduce different skills or strategies, you might say, "Here's another way to become a *strong* reader." Everyone wants to be strong. And PS: students need this training and reinforcement *at every level. We need to model the habits of effective readers not just with elementary students but also with middle and high school students.*

In order to be strong at paraphrasing, you must do the following:

1. **Unpack vocabulary.** In other words, use your word-attack skills and root knowledge to translate unfamiliar words. Of course, it also helps if you already know a lot of words.
2. **Unpack grammar and syntax.** One reason students struggle so mightily on the PSAT and SAT is that the passages tend to be constructed with long, complicated sentences. To decipher these difficult texts, students need to recognize transitions and signal words, and know how clauses and phrases function.
3. ***Infer* from idioms.** As strange and backwards as it sounds, you *do* have to infer in order to paraphrase. More on this oddity in a moment.

HOW CAN YOU TEACH STUDENTS HOW TO PARAPHRASE?

1. **Explain the Comprehension Process and how paraphrasing fits into it.** Like the rest of us, students need to know *what* they're supposed to be doing, and *why*. Also, it's easier to do something if you understand how it works. Comprehending, which we do *all the time*, involves a series of steps that can actually be taught. It's not magic. Everyone can become better at it. The same goes with paraphrasing. Who wouldn't want to learn these skills?

2. **Strengthen *their knowledge of roots.*** In every grade, we should provide direct instruction on vocabulary, with heavy doses of Latin and Greek roots, prefixes, and suffixes. While individual teachers can take this on, it also helps to have a schoolwide emphasis on vocabulary building. Some schools use the "Word of the Day" to boost vocabulary, but the words tend to be arbitrarily selected and unrelated to one another. Consequently, their meanings do not stick. I recommend trying the "Root of the Week" approach. Think of it this way: if you

learn a word, you only learn one word. If you learn a root, you could be learning a *dozen* words that use the same root.

With Root of the Week, the idea is that the target root is repeated *five times* in five different words throughout the week. The repetition reinforces the meaning of the root so that when students recognize it in different words, they are able to infer the meanings of words they haven't seen before. They build stronger root-attack and word-attack skills. They start to notice roots in the same way that people who have just bought a new car suddenly notice everyone else driving the same model. And they become more excited about words in general.

How can this approach work *schoolwide* (such as during morning announcements)? On Monday someone (ideally a student who has rehearsed with a teacher) introduces the Root of the Week and explains its meaning. Example: "cred," which means "believe." Then the presenter offers a word that uses that root, such as "credit," which is based on the belief that someone will pay you back. The presenter gives a user-friendly definition and synonyms, as well as a sentence using the word in context. On Tuesday, students are reminded of the same root and given a new word that uses the root (such as "incredible"). Then lather, rinse, repeat all week. Next week: different root. At University Heights Charter School in Newark, a turnaround school that saw dramatic gains in student achievement, the principal, Rahshene Davis, took this approach. She would introduce the Root of the Week and one word using the root each morning in Community Circle, then teachers followed up in their classrooms. Students who found the word in or outside of school somewhere or used it in context were given shout-outs the next morning in Community Circle. The school also featured the Root of the Week on a bulletin board in the main hallway, where parents could read it and discuss it with their children.[14]

See the TLC "Root of the Week" page for a sample PowerPoint for "cred."

Another approach is to use Root of the Week *in your individual classroom*. For the sake of efficiency, you can introduce all five words at one time and have students infer the meaning of the root according to how the words are used in context.

See the TLC "Root of the Week" page for a Sample Root of the Week Hypothesis Sheet for "cede/ceed"[15] and these Websites, which will make this idea easy to implement:

- http://www.learnthat.org/pages/view/roots.html (Possibly my favorite—very comprehensive!)

- https://www.msu.edu/~defores1/gre/roots/gre_rts_afx2.htm (General roots with words using them)
- http://readinglesson.com/pdffiles/bwdemo.pdf (includes a PDF file that you can download for free)
- http://www.macroevolution.net/root-word-dictionary.html#.UC50G44voWlMvqpo (for science)
- http://dictionary.reference.com

3. **Teach *transitions* and *signal words*.** Sometimes it's not the big words that trip us up, it's the little ones. Students must be on the lookout for signal words that can help them decipher convoluted sentences. *Along with direct instruction on transitions and signal words, model your thought processes via think-aloud and read-aloud strategies.* (More on these in the During-Reading Strategies section in Chapter Two.)

It will also help students to *write* more effectively, knowing that it's their job to steer the reader with transitions. Students need to know what we mean by "logical flow." Don't assume that they know what "logical" means, so be prepared to offer some lessons on that. If you're frustrated with textbooks that define *transitions* merely as "time and order words," resulting in robotic writing that relies heavily on "first, second, and third," here are some Web pages (found on the TLC "Logic" page) that offer more nuanced explanations of what transitions are and how they work:

- http://www.virtualsalt.com/transits.htm
- https://www.msu.edu/~jdowell/135/transw.html
- http://www.studygs.net/wrtstr6.htm

One caveat: I've heard from teachers who said their students told them they'd "never heard of transitions" when they knew they had. It turned out that the previous teacher had called them "time and order" words. My suggestion is to teach students synonyms so that no matter what other people call them, they'll know what they are.

4. **Teach students how to use academic language effectively.** Check out Chapter Four, on speaking and listening, for a full explanation. In the meantime, here are two great books dealing with the use of academic language:

Graff, G., & Birkenstein, C. (2010). *They say/I say: The moves that matter in academic writing* (2nd ed.). New York: Norton.
Zwiers, J. (2008). *Building academic language: Essential practices for content classrooms.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

5. **Teach *grammar* and *syntax*, especially *clauses* and *phrases*.** For many years, I wrestled with How to Teach Grammar. Should it stand alone, or somehow be incorporated into writing instruction? For students who couldn't pick a noun or a verb out of a lineup, where should I start? I experimented wildly. One of the most effective approaches involved a combination of direct instruction on types of clauses and phrases (with their accompanying punctuation) and writing conferences in which I said things like "I notice you've used an appositive here: what kind of punctuation do you need?" or "This doesn't look like a complete sentence yet. What's missing?" When students knew the terms and we could share this common language *for a purpose*, it was easier for them to remember *and use* the constructions. Their writing became more complex and, at the same time, clearer.

Students need to know Why Punctuation Is Important. In *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves*, Lynne Truss illustrates this point brilliantly with two letters that use exactly the same words but different punctuation. One is a love letter, the other a breakup letter. This example definitely catches the attention of teenagers: if you aren't careful with punctuation, you could intend to write someone a love letter and instead accidentally break up with him![16]

One of my favorite books on grammar instruction is *Mechanically Inclined*, by Jeff Anderson.[17] Unlike many people who waste countless hours forcing students to correct random errors (often without learning the rules), Anderson believes in showing models of *effective* grammatical constructs (such as beginning with two-word sentences) and having students imitate them. He posts anchor charts in his classroom and gives students opportunities to practice incorporating these elements in their writing. Harry Noden's *Image Grammar*[18] takes a similar exemplar-based approach, with a bit more emphasis on writing as an artistic enterprise.

6. **Teach students how to *infer meaning* from *idioms*.** Some people refer to paraphrasing as "literal comprehension," meaning "You can tell what is literally going on or being said." And to some extent, that's accurate. But there's more to it. In any given sentence, *figurative* things are also happening or being expressed, too.

On the road to comprehension, idioms are speed bumps. When we talk about reading comprehension gaps (to toss in another metaphor), I believe idioms are

the missing link. No matter how you slice them (See? I can't help myself!), idioms are essential to lucid comprehension.

Look at this example: "Because my participation in the stock market had *cost me an arm and a leg*, I decided to invest in real estate instead."

The syntax in this sentence is somewhat complex and the vocabulary is somewhat challenging, but let's say you could break the clauses apart and find synonyms for "participation" and "invest." If you'd been listening to the news lately, "stock market" and "real estate" would not be unfamiliar terms, even if you didn't know much about them. You could probably paraphrase *most* of the sentence. But not the idiom. You'd have to *slow down* and *draw an inference about the idiom*. And while you might know the literal meanings of "cost," "me" "an arm" "and" and "a leg," you might not grasp what they meant when bundled together.

"How hard could it be?" you ask. I once sat in a seventh-grade classroom where students could not explain the expression "go out on a limb." And there was a tree visible through the window.

We assume that everyone knows these "simple" expressions. While the words in an idiom might be short, if you haven't ever heard a particular idiom, it's not so simple. And if English is not your first language, you are less likely to have heard common idioms. So when people use them, you don't understand what they're saying. And if they're telling a joke, you don't get it. That's frustrating. It can be tough on the joke teller, too. It took me several months of living with a Chinese roommate in grad school before I realized that it wasn't that she had no sense of humor; she just didn't comprehend most of my jokes.

Why don't our students know more about idioms? One problem is that English teachers often limit their discussion of figurative language to the context of poetry and fiction, emphasizing metaphors and similes only in those genres. Unless we point them out, students may fail to notice that idioms and other figurative uses of language also appear frequently in nonfiction—in newspapers and magazines and everyday conversation.

Here's the bottom line: students who struggle to speak standard English (whether English is their first language or not) will neither recognize nor comprehend standard English idioms. So we need to teach *both* the idioms *and* the strategies for figuring them out.

Here's a simple graphic organizer (found on the TLC "Idiom Power" page) that you can use as a Do Now to boost Idiom Power.

Here is the idiom.	***Draw* a picture of the idiom.**	***Paraphrase:* What does it say, literally?**	***Draw an inference:* What does this expression really mean? What's the message?**
"A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush."		Having a bird in your hand is the equivalent of having two in a nearby hedge or tree.	It's better to have a little bit of something than to have none of it and only hope you can get more.
This homework was only "a drop in the bucket" compared to all of the work you'll be assigned this semester.			

These two Websites (which also appear on the TLC "Idiom Power" page) will help you teach idioms:

- http://www.idiomsite.com
- http://www.idiomconnection.com

7. **Train students *how to paraphrase strategically*.** Many students struggle with paraphrasing because they are unsure which words to *change* versus which to *keep*. They need a strategy for how to make these decisions.

Following is one that works, no matter what grade or subject you teach.

Step 1. *Circle* or *bracket* the words or phrases that you *cannot* or don't want to change. These words or phrases are crucial to the meaning of the passage and should not be changed because doing so would change that meaning. *Mnemonic hint: Help students remember what to circle by telling them to "wrap the words you want to keep in protective bubble wrap" and pretend to hug something precious*. The words you want to keep or "protect" might include:

- Proper nouns (unless they can be replaced by something that does not change their meaning, such as "Obama" → "the President")
- Statistics or specific information
- Words that are unique or difficult to find a synonym for

Step 2. *Underline* the words or phrases that you know you *can* change. Here are two examples:

Original	**Paraphrased**
A plan to start a [billion-dollar] government drug [development center] is a result of the Obama administration's concerns about the slowing pace of [new drugs] coming out of the [pharmaceutical] industry.[19]	An initiative to begin a billion-dollar national drug development center came about because the president and his colleagues are worried about how slowly new drugs are emerging from pharmaceutical companies.
[Two days] of talks between [Iran and six] world powers ended in failure [on Saturday, with Iran] refusing to engage on any concrete proposals to build confidence that [its nuclear program] is only for peaceful [purposes] and with no date set for another meeting.[20]	Two days of meetings involving Iran and six other nations ended unsuccessfully on Saturday because Iran refused to take any specific actions to prove that its nuclear program is not for military purposes, and there is no plan to meet again.

Note: Both of these statements were taken from *The New York Times*. Creating random sentences for practice presents an opportunity to review content or teach current events along the way. For handouts you can use with students to teach this strategy, see How to Paraphrase and How to Paraphrase: Third-Grade Practice on the TLC "Comprehension 101" page.

8. **After teaching the skill directly, weave paraphrasing practice into class discussions.** In addition to carrying content, class discussions provide opportunities to practice skills. An easy way to target paraphrasing is to ask students to "paraphrase or restate what was just said in your own words." I like to wink when I say it that way, to see who gets the joke. Another approach that works is during Think-Pair-Share: instead of asking students what *they* thought, ask them what their *partner* said.

9. **Make paraphrasing *fun*.** Last but not least, it's important to make paraphrasing enjoyable. One night while attending a performance of the Monty Python musical *Spamalot*, I realized (probably because I tend to see everything through comprehension-colored glasses) that it included some hilarious examples of paraphrasing. For instance, in the scene where King Arthur encounters Dennis the Peasant and explains how the Lady of the Lake made him king, Dennis mocks the absurdity of the concept by restating it in several different ways. This scene originally appeared in the movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, and the clip can be seen on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dOOTKA0aGI0

For more resources involving paraphrasing, check out the TLC "Comprehension 101" page and the TLC "Connecting Reading, Writing, and Test Prep" page.

DOGGIE BAG

1. What must you do in order to paraphrase well?
2. What role does paraphrasing play in the Comprehension Process?
3. How will you teach your students how to paraphrase strategically?
4. How can you weave more paraphrasing practice into your lessons?

KEY CRITICAL READING SKILL 2: INFERENCE

I am tempted to call this skill "Questioning and Inference" because in order to draw an inference you need to ask a question—usually Why? or How? In the comprehension process, you must also be able to paraphrase the text in order to draw a conclusion from it. This explains why analyses of critical reading assessment results often reveal that some students can paraphrase but cannot infer. Inference—which some call "extended reasoning"—is more rigorous.

Inference and explanation are two sides of the same coin. "Why did the man collapse?" You think about it and figure out, "He must have been sick." This is your inference, and you might explain further: "Most healthy people don't suddenly fall down."

Although inference is challenging, it can be practiced in many ways, and every form of practice will strengthen your students' comprehension skills. Each time you ask the question Why? and students have to explain their ideas, they are practicing inference. *If you maintain high standards for discourse in your classroom, requiring complete-sentence responses, you will boost not only fluency but also comprehension*. I agree wholeheartedly with Doug Lemov that "the complete sentence is the battering ram that knocks down the door to college."[21] I would also add, "And it's great low-hanging fruit for teachers who want to help students improve their reading and writing." The oral practice of expressing complete thoughts translates into more penetrating reading and more coherent writing, plus it teaches other students (who hear these complete explanations) more along the way. It's a win-win-win.

How does inference manifest itself in different content areas? Consider these similar tasks:

- Predict
- Extrapolate
- Hypothesize
- Deduce
- Solve
- Analyze
- Explain
- Surmise
- Figure out
- Make connections

When your students do any of these things, they are working on inference.

What I love most about inference is that it (1) engages students and (2) solidifies understanding. For instance, if a student asks, "What does X mean?" and I simply tell him a definition, he doesn't have to engage in any thinking, so he will either remember my definition or he will not. But if I use X in a sentence and he has to figure out the meaning for himself, he now *owns* the word.

Effective teachers don't simply sprinkle opportunities for inference into their lessons; instead, it drives their instruction. They view students not as containers or sponges, but as *sleuths*. I learned this firsthand from Charlie Speck, my high school Latin teacher, a truly brilliant man. Charlie was one of the reasons I became a teacher. He treated us as detectives and saw himself as the Chief Clue-Provider. He would string us along, dropping clue after clue, gradually leading us down the path until we understood even the most arcane Latin grammatical points. More than thirty years later, I still remember more about Latin than I do about World War I, which a handful of other teachers tried to teach me—most of them by slowly (and boringly, if that's a word) revealing facts on an overhead projector.

Students who are consistently asked to draw inferences tend to be more engaged and are less likely to become bored or disruptive. If you find yourself struggling with classroom management, study the techniques in Lemov's *Teach Like a Champion* and reflect on the extent to which your philosophy of teaching requires students to be sleuths. If students are fully engaged in learning—solving problems, figuring things out, and the like—then they are less likely to misbehave.

How Can You Teach Students How to Infer?

1. **Review the Comprehension Process and how inference works. Clarify the difference between paraphrasing and inference.** It is particularly important to point out the distinctions between paraphrasing and inference. Many students, especially those who might be labeled "concrete-sequential learners," can paraphrase but fail to grasp the concept of inference. They miss key ideas when reading and strain to explain their own ideas, particularly in writing.

This phenomenon became illuminated for me one day when I was trying to coach Isherra, a hard-working and enthusiastic student, in how to draw inferences. I had asked the class to pull three quotes from the latest chapter of *The Kite Runner*[22] by Khaled Hosseini and tell what they could infer from the quotes. Isherra, along with several others, had *paraphrased* her quotes.

As we sat together and I tried to explain what she needed to do, it occurred to me that she *knew* how to paraphrase and she *knew* how to infer, but she didn't

know the *difference*. At that moment, the Falling Man was born. I created two posters, not just for Isherra—who said, "Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhh, I get it, Miss T!!!"—but for everyone else in the room who had missed this little mini-lesson. From that day forward, I could simply point to either poster, depending on what I was asking them to do.

Paraphrase	**Inference**
"The man fell down." → "He collapsed."	"The man fell down." → "He must have been sick."

I have since created a graphic organizer, cleverly titled the Paraphrasing and Inference Organizer, which looks like this:[23]

Original quote or passage	***Paraphrase* (then, in your head, ask "Why?" or "What can we infer?")**	**Draw an *inference* to answer "Why?"**
My friend loves pizza.	My buddy adores pizza.	She probably likes cheese.

2. **Ask *why* as much as possible and require students to respond with complete sentences.** As discussed earlier, when students *explain* their ideas, they are employing their inference skills. Be sure to ask *why* even when students give you what you consider the "right" answer. Why? They might have merely guessed. Also, their explanation will teach others who might not have understood the issue or problem at hand.

I once asked a class, as a way of reviewing vocabulary, "Would you rather be described as *heinous*, or *grandiose*?" Javon, who rarely raised his hand, was practically launching himself out of his seat. So I called on him.

"Heinous," he said. "Definitely heinous."

Stifling a giggle (and the thought, *Are you kidding?*), I asked him why.

He looked me straight in the eye. "Because heinous is bad, but grandiose people think they're all that, and I wouldn't want someone to think of me that way."

The class erupted, "All right, Javon!!!" Meanwhile, I turned to the board quickly so that they wouldn't see the tears that had leapt to my eyes. In that moment, I realized several things: (1) I had underestimated him, (2) if I hadn't asked him why, I wouldn't have known how much he knew, and (3) he had just taught everyone else in the class both words in a context that they could understand. Asking *why* gives students a chance to explain what they know, and it gives them a chance to *shine*. Javon taught me that.

One caveat: If you have not been in the habit of asking students *Why?* they might react defensively or with less confidence. It's important to prepare them for this new approach so that they won't feel threatened and will instead take pride in their ability to explain their ideas.

3. **Make sure students understand the difference between *how* and *why*.** *How* and *why* can both elicit inferences and explanations, so they provide essential triggers for comprehension and expression. The problem is that although they seem like simple words, students often conflate them.

I figured this out one day while visiting a seventh-grade class that was revising responses to open-ended reading questions. I approached one girl who was chatting with her neighbor, evidently in an effort to avoid the assignment.

When I asked her how things were going, she replied bitterly, "My teacher gave me a 1 [out of 4], and I don't know why."

We began by looking at the Open-Ended Response Writing Rubric.[24] "Let's see if you restated the question," I suggested. The question was: "Explain how Sam's attitude toward the bird-calling contest changed throughout that day."

The girl had written, "Sam's attitude changed because . . . "

"Aha," I said. She stared at me quizzically. I told her, "I believe you know the answer to this question, but I think you approached it in slightly the wrong way. Let's see if I'm right, OK?"

She nodded.

"Let's pretend I walked into the classroom this morning wearing a parka, mittens, and a scarf. What could you infer about me, based on how I was dressed?"

"You were cold," she replied.

"Exactly. Now, say I took all of that apparel off by the end of class. *Why* would I make that change?"

"Because you were warm."

"Right. In this room, I would probably be sweating. Now, here's another question, and I want you to notice the difference: *How* would I have changed?"

"You would be wearing less clothing."

"Correct. Notice the difference between the *how* and *why* questions. Now, let's go back to your original question: *How* did Sam's attitude toward the bird-calling contest change throughout the day?"

"Oh," she said, and she was off to the races. Within a minute, she had explained *how*, and just for good measure, she also told me *why* his attitude had changed.

See, she understood the story. She just didn't understand the question.

4. **Require students to respond to *one another*, not just the teacher.** Why? For starters, they will learn more if they listen to one another. And again, they will gain more practice in explaining their ideas. *Note:* If you're having trouble getting students to listen to one another, check out *Teach Like a Champion*, especially Technique 32 (SLANT).[25]

5. **Avoid rhetorical questions.** "Julius Caesar wasn't really a great leader, was he?" or even "Was Julius Caesar really a great leader?" stated in a negative tone (and with a squinched-up face) makes the answer obvious. *Rhetorical questions are not really questions; therefore, they do not require students to think.* If you want to make an assertion, make one. Then ask a question that invites actual thought. Here are some examples:

- "I don't think Julius Caesar was a great leader. Why would I think that?" This approach requires students to empathize with you. Then you can follow up with, "Do you agree or disagree with me? Why?"
- "Some (uninformed) people think frogs are reptiles. Why would they think that?"
- Or make an assertion or an observation and ask, "Why is this true?" or "Why did this happen?" or "What caused this result or effect?" or "What do you think will happen next, and why?"

6. **Design assignments that require students to infer.** Check out the following snapshots of handy TLC graphic organizers:

Quotations to Paraphrasing and Inference[26]

Quotation	**Paraphrase it**	**Draw an inference from it. (What does the speaker believe? What message is s/he trying to convey?)**
"Change your thoughts and you change your world." Norman Vincent Peale	If you alter how you perceive things, it will alter how you experience life.	How we think affects how we behave.
"Nothing is worth more than this day." Johann Wolfgang von Goethe		

Character Traits: Quote and Explain[27]

Character Trait	**Quote (evidence—include page numbers)**	**Explanation**
Example: Stone Fox is *generous*.	"Stone Fox's dream was for his people to return to their homeland. Stone Fox was using the money he won from racing to simply buy the land back. He had already purchased four farms and over 200 acres" (p. 53).[28]	Stone Fox's people were kicked off of their land, and he enters dogsled races to use the winnings to support his people. His actions show that he cares deeply about his people.

Story Detectives[29]

Question	Answer (explanation)	Prove it! (evidence—include page numbers)
Example: How do the scoundrels fool people who work for the emperor? (based on "The Emperor's New Clothes" by Hans Christian Andersen[30])	The scoundrels say that if you can't see the clothing they design, you must be stupid or incompetent. The prime minister falls prey to this trick.	"I can't see anything," he thought (p. 2). "If I see nothing, that means I'm stupid! Or, worse, incompetent!" If the prime minister admitted that he didn't see anything, he would be discharged from his office.

Note: In the Story Detectives organizer, you can either provide the questions or ask your students to generate the questions. The key is that the questions must be open-ended (*how* or *why*) inference questions.

DOGGIE BAG

1. What is the difference between paraphrasing and inference?
2. What must one do in order to draw an inference?
3. How are inference and explanation two sides of the same coin?
4. How can you strengthen students' inference skills?

KEY CRITICAL READING SKILL 3: VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT (AND VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION)

The other day while listening to NPR on my way to work, it occurred to me that *party* means different things depending on what age you are. For kindergartners, it's all about the cupcakes. In college, maybe beer pong comes to mind. And if

you're a forty-six-year-old woman who spends a lot of time commuting, you think of restaurants, Democrats, and Republicans. All of this is to say that when we teach vocabulary, maybe we should say, "Here's what it means now. But stay tuned!"

Figuring out word meanings based on the context, although an aspect of paraphrasing, deserves its own attention. We use this skill constantly, and it's often assessed separately on standardized tests—for example, via sentence completion questions on the PSAT and SAT. This skill also involves inference, because you have to draw an inference based on the context in order to figure out what a word means.

Vocabulary knowledge is vital to comprehension. So, how do we learn words? *By listening, by reading, and through instruction.*

Listening

Hart and Risley[31] found that if you hear lots of words, you will learn lots of words. It should also be clear that we are dependent on learning words orally until we learn how to read. But even after we learn to read, we continue to learn words by listening. My friend Rahshene Davis, formerly the principal at University Heights Charter School in Newark, likes to play this game with her son: she'll say a word, then he has to give a synonym, then she'll counter with another synonym, and so on until one of them runs out of vocabulary. For example, "Run"—"Dart"—"Jog"—"Dash"—"Sprint"—and so on.

She wasn't sure if this game was having an impact until one day (when he was ten years old) when she took him to Great Adventure with a friend. They were waiting in line at the Batman Ride, and her son commented to his buddy, "If I lived in Gotham City, I would totally *rely* on Batman."

His friend asked, "What does rely mean?"

Her son responded, "You know: depend on, count on . . . "

Bottom line: you can improve your students' vocabulary simply by speaking differently in class. Try this: "Who would like to help me *disseminate* these papers?" Or instead of saying, "Stop," try: "Halt, stop, cease, desist!" Students already know "stop." If you speak redundantly (paraphrasing and using synonyms . . .), they will infer the meanings of words they didn't previously know. Having to process the words by inferring their meaning will enable students to *own* the words. And they will start to *use* those words!

Reading

People like to say that we learn words from reading, and it's true. But how many words? Beck, McKeown, and Kucan report: "Studies estimate that of 100 unfamiliar words met in reading, between 5 and 15 of them will be learned (Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985; Swanborn & de Glopper, 1999)."[32] That's not very encouraging.

The problem is that our ability to determine the meaning of an unfamiliar word depends on the context. Some contexts are helpful, while some actually hinder comprehension. Take this example:

> Sandra had won the dance contest, and the audience's cheers brought her to the stage for an encore. "Every step she takes is so perfect and graceful," Ginny said *grudgingly* as she watched Sandra dance.[33]

If you didn't know what "grudgingly" meant before you read this example, you might walk away thinking it had a positive connotation. Everyone else is admiring Sandra: why wouldn't Ginny? Beck, McKeown, and Kucan call this an example of "misdirective context" because the context is so misleading. On the other hand, this example also illustrates how we can help build vocabulary by reading aloud with proper expression and intonation. If you read it with feeling, students will grasp its counterintuitive meaning.

By contrast:

> When the cat pounced on the dog, he leapt up, yelping, and knocked down a shelf of books. The animals ran past Wendy, tripping her. She cried out and fell to the floor. As the noise and confusion mounted, Mother hollered upstairs, "What's all that *commotion*?"[34]

You would have to be tied up, blindfolded, and locked in a closet not to comprehend the meaning of *commotion* from all of the context clues. Beck, McKeown, and Kucan call this an example of "directive context" because it directs the reader to the meaning. I like to think of it as "instructive context" because the teacher purposefully creates sentences with enough context clues to suggest the meaning of the word being studied. Bottom line: that's the kind of context you should provide when introducing words to your students.

Instruction

My best advice for how to improve vocabulary instruction is to read *Bringing Words to Life*, by Isabel L. Beck, Margaret G. McKeown, and Linda Kucan.[35] Like

many others who were taught a particular way and didn't know any better, before I read that book, I was guilty of giving students lists of words to define and write sentences for. Students would then create crazy sentences, and I would wonder what was wrong with them. Actually, nothing was wrong with *them*. They were simply doing what I'd asked them to do, which was crazy.

As Beck, McKeown, and Kucan point out, dictionaries suffer from many problems, not the least of which is lack of space. As a result, definitions are often too limited to be useful to someone trying to write a sentence with the word. My favorite example is this one:

> Disrupt: break up; split → "We disrupted the candy bar so we could all share it."[36]

This definition of *disrupt* isn't bad, but it's inadequate. And if you look at the sentence, it makes some sense, given the lame definition: the student has applied her background knowledge of candy bars and friendship to use the new word in a context she's familiar with. While you're busy asking, "What were you thinking???" she's feeling proud of herself for demonstrating the positive character trait of sharing.

Effective vocabulary instruction has three phases: (1) select and introduce, (2) review and reinforce, and (3) assess.

Select and Introduce

Beck, McKeown, and Kucan recommend selecting "Tier 2" words.[37] Following is a quick primer on their three tiers of vocabulary.

Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3
Basic words that typically do not require instruction	*High-frequency* words for mature language users; found across a *variety* of domains	*Low-frequency* words often limited to specific domains; *jargon*; arcane or archaic words
dog, talk, sad	robust, absurd, marinate	parallelogram, neutron, alliteration

When trying to decide if a word belongs in Tier 2, ask yourself the following questions:

- Is it important and useful? (Do most educated adults know this word?)
- Can it be used in multiple contexts? (Think *revolution*.)
- Do students already understand the general concept of this word? (For example, *robust* is a synonym for *strong*, a concept they should already know.)

To introduce new words, here are the key steps:

- Provide the words in sentences that offer *instructive or directive* context.
- Explain meanings in user-friendly language and elaborate.
- Teach pronunciation. If students can't say the word, they won't use it in speech *or* writing. I highly recommend choral practice in which you pronounce the word, then point to the class and say the word with them, repeated at least three times.
- Teach differences, contexts, and nuances.

I like to use the following simple format for introducing the words.

Word **[with space to write more information about the word]**	***Sentence using word:*** **circle the context clues.**	***Speculation:*** **What do you think this word means, judging by context clues?**
disrupt	A power outage that left us in the dark disrupted our meeting until someone located the candles.	[Students record their ideas about what they think the word means.]

Review and Reinforce

Once students have had some initial exposure to the words, you'll need to review and reinforce meanings in various ways. Here are some suggestions:

- **Teach pronunciation.** Students who can't pronounce the words won't use them, either orally or in writing. If they can't sound them out, they won't write them. My favorite tactic is to establish a routine where I pronounce the

word then open my hands toward the class and pronounce it with them, repeating this three times to ensure I've engaged any potential stragglers. I do this *any* time a student struggles with pronunciation because I know that if one student can't pronounce a word, then others probably can't, either. This "choral pronunciation" approach spares struggling individuals any embarrassment and sends a message to the entire class that "we are all in this together, all learning together."

- **Post the words for easy reference.** In my travels, I've seen many different forms of Word Wall organization (such as alphabetical, parts of speech, or synonyms and antonyms), but I'm not sure that there is one best approach. My friend Katy Wischow, a fabulous middle school English teacher at Greater Newark Charter School, notes that Word Walls get more use when you play games with them (like, "Who can find two synonyms on the wall?" or, "Which words have to do with _____ concept?" which allows for explanation, or, "Which words have a negative connotation?"[38] You can design endless variations. As long as students *use* the words, that's all that matters. And on that point, it's helpful to praise those who do.
- **Use the words as much as possible yourself.** Consider challenging the class: "Let's see which one of us can use more Word Wall words this period!" Also, share your vocabulary lists with colleagues so that they can reinforce the words, too.
- **Give students frequent opportunities to engage in wordplay.** Beck, McKeown, and Kucan[39] offer numerous suggestions (such as the one mentioned earlier: "Would you rather be described as ____, or ____?"), and I won't repeat them. You should buy their book.
- **Play games with the words.** Jessica Majerus, an excellent middle school English teacher at North Star Academy Charter School in Newark, developed an engaging vocabulary review game-activity that takes only three minutes. Students earn points for creating sentences using the vocabulary words. After they create their sentence, they pass a ball to someone else in the room. She tracks the "class points" on a clipboard and assigns them as follows:
  - 1 point = attempt
  - 2 points = correct usage
  - 3 points = context makes the meaning of the word clear

In her description of the game, which is available on the TLC "Building Robust Vocabulary" page, she notes: "You need to hear a new word seven times to learn it. By playing this game, students get to hear the words being used over and over. They are practicing just by listening. I can easily assess misconceptions or usage errors and correct them as we play the game or address them later. The class has to work together. The game goes by quickly, and if they argue or yell for the ball, they don't earn the points."[40]

- **Make it cool.** Encourage students to use "strong" vocabulary. Everyone wants to be strong. At Soaring Heights Charter School in Jersey City, teachers created a bulletin board with headshots of students glued to drawings of muscular bodies holding up their favorite strong vocabulary words.

Assess

The most important thing to remember about vocabulary assessment is that students must demonstrate that they can *use* the words. That is why matching words to definitions is not sufficient. Following are some alternative types of questions to consider (which Jessica Majerus developed[41] based on her reading of *Bringing Words to Life*).

Answer the question. Use your knowledge of our vocabulary to answer the following questions (two points each).

Which of these do you think should be *compulsory*: buckling your seatbelt in a car or being in your house by 8:00 pm? Why?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Scenarios. Pick the scenario that best matches the word and defend your answer (two points each).

Word	Scenario 1	Scenario 2
interspersed	I was so angry that my writing was mixed with invectives.	I was so angry that my writing was made up completely of invectives.

Why?

Using stronger words in writing. Improve the paragraph below by crossing out the weak word(s) and replacing each with a stronger word. Write the stronger word above the crossed-out word. Make sure to use the correct form of the word. I am looking for four vocabulary words to be used, but if you see other opportunities to use stronger vocabulary, I will give you extra credit for doing so (two points each).

In *Night*,[42] Elie was very scared when he went to Auschwitz. When he arrived there was a big commotion, but then the guards forced all of the prisoners to line up and have their heads shaved. After this, they were told to strip and were given prison clothes to wear. It was a joke though, because they were given the wrong size clothes to wear. They were then looked at to see if they were strong enough. Of course, the guards treated them badly and yelled and cursed at them. These experiences, and seeing the crematorium, made Elie lose faith that God would rescue his people from the evil of the Nazis.

Using context clues. Read the passages to figure out which definition is best for the italicized word (three points each).

- 1 point = underlining context clues that make sense (underlining the whole passage doesn't count)
- 1 point = explaining your choice with reasons (even if you get the wrong answer, if your thinking is logical and clear, you can earn this point)
- 1 point = picking the correct answer

Which of these most closely matches the meaning of *stocky* in the passage below?

"He was a *stocky* man with big shoulders, the neck of a bull, thick lips, and curly hair" (p. 47).

a. sturdy

b. thin

c. mean

d. angry

Why?

DOGGIE BAG

1. How do we learn words?
2. What are Tier 2 vocabulary words?
3. What strategies will you use to teach vocabulary more effectively?

KEY CRITICAL READING SKILL 4: INFERRING MAIN IDEA OR ARGUMENT (AKA SUMMARIZING)

We now arrive at the critical reading skill that students often struggle with the most.

For decades, possibly centuries, teachers and standardized tests have exhorted students to "find the main idea." They search and search, and they just can't find it. Although it's true that the thesis of a nonfiction piece is often located in the first paragraph, and subsequent paragraphs should have topic sentences that one can identify, "find" is an inexact word for what readers actually must do. It's not a Where's Waldo? exercise. And in the case of fiction, there are no thesis statements or topic sentences to point to. More often than not, no matter what you read, finding the main idea is more accurately described as an act of *inference*.

How Can You Teach Students How to Infer the Main Idea or Argument (AKA Summarize)?

1. **Review the Comprehension Process and explain how we accumulate inferences as we work through a text to arrive at the main idea or argument.** Make sure students know what inference is and how the accumulation of inferences and insights in any given text adds up to a main idea or argument. Model how you do this in both nonfiction and fiction so that students can see the similarities and differences. PS: Don't forget that this approach applies to *any* "text": portraits, political cartoons, song lyrics, geometric proofs, scientific theories, and so forth.

2. **Clarify what we mean by *main idea*.** Unfortunately, the word *idea*, which is clean and beautiful when you have a good one, turns muddy when overused. Far

too many people conflate *idea* with *topic*. This explains why students often give one-word answers such as "Running" or "Terrorism" when asked for the main idea. "Running, though challenging, can be good for your health" is a legitimate main idea. Or more precisely, it's a main *argument*. One of my goals in life is to convince everyone I meet to stop using *main idea* and switch to—or at least include—*main argument*. Maybe I'm naïve, but I think a small change in word choice could make a big difference in comprehension.

So, Step 2 is to clarify that you want to know what the main *argument* is, and it should be expressed as a *complete sentence*. Giving students examples is a fine way to illustrate this idea—er, argument. It is also important to note that pieces of fiction and narrative writing don't have arguments; they have *themes* or messages. Following is a handy poster.

What is the *main idea*?

- In nonfiction: *main argument*
- In fiction or narrative: *message*, *lesson*, *theme*

3. **Teach the difference between *argument* and *evidence*.** Not long after your first attempt to elicit main arguments from students, you will undoubtedly notice that they often conflate *argument* and *evidence*. Also, if you've been reading the Common Core Standards, you're aware of their emphasis on the use of evidence to make arguments. (PS: For more information on the Common Core State Standards, see http://www.corestandards.org. Also, check out the TLC "Standards" page for the K–12 ELA Common Core Standards Tracking Sheet, which lists each grade's standards in a separate spreadsheet. A snippet of this document, which is particularly handy when writing or evaluating curriculum, appears in the Appendix of this book.) So, Step 3 is to teach students how to recognize the difference between the two. I recommend this simple approach: give them a list of sentences about whatever content you're dealing with at the moment. Some of those sentences should be facts (that is, evidence), some arguments (that is, claims, opinions, or debatable statements), and they all require proof or evidence for support. Following are a few examples.[43]

Which is an *argument*? Which is *evidence*? How can you tell?

On J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*:[44]

1. _____ Allie, Holden's brother, is dead. (*fact*, so it has to be *evidence*)
2. _____ Losing his brother causes a major impact on Holden's life. (*needs evidence or explanation to prove it*, so it has to be an *argument*)

On Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR):

1. _____ In 1905, FDR and his fiancée—sixth cousin, Anna Eleanor Roosevelt—chose St. Patrick's Day as their wedding date for the sole reason that it was the only day that FDR's fifth cousin and Eleanor's uncle, President Theodore Roosevelt, could attend. (*fact*, so it has to be *evidence*)
2. _____ Eleanor Roosevelt can take credit for converting her patrician fiancé, Franklin, from a noblesse oblige steward into a sensitive and empathetic populist when she showed him the wretched state of the poor in New York City's slums. (*needs evidence/explanation to prove it*, so it has to be an argument)

See the TLC "Connecting Reading, Writing, and Test Prep" page for more exemplars. We will revisit argument versus evidence further in Chapter Three, in the section on What Students Struggle With the Most When They Write.

In the process of teaching argument and evidence, you might want to try what my friend Katy Wischow calls the "Boxes and Bullets" approach. Students put the argument sentence in a box, then list bulleted details that support the argument right below it. You can also train students to do this during read-alouds; they orally or mentally say the main idea and point to their hand, then tick off supports on their fingers.[45] Whether they draw the boxes and bullets or point to their hands and fingers, this approach helps students visualize the difference between arguments and evidence.

4. **Teach students how to recognize *topic sentences.*** Once students have a clearer sense what an argument is (not the kind that involves flinging plates or

profanity), it will be easier for them to recognize topic sentences. Even so, no one emerges from the womb knowing how to find a topic sentence. So, some training is in order. Try this next approach.

Give students a paragraph (ideally with content relevant to something longer that they are about to read, to provide background knowledge) and model the following:

1. When looking for the topic sentence in a paragraph, we want to narrow our search down to the first few sentences.
2. Look for a sentence that raises *How?* or *Why?* questions. Also look for "debatable or arguable" words. Adjectives tend to be debatable. For example, what is *your* definition of *exciting*? It's probably different from that of the person sitting next to you. So if you wanted to make an argument about something being "exciting," you'd need to provide evidence and explanation.
3. Test that sentence by creating a How? or Why? question that mentions the topic.
4. Look in the paragraph for evidence or proof that answers the question, and if you can find that evidence, you have correctly identified the topic sentence.

Here's an example I drafted about the desk of a typical fifth-grader:

It's true. The inside of a typical fifth-grader's desk is difficult to keep organized and clean. There is never enough room for all of the textbooks, workbooks, independent reading books, binders, and notebooks, much less the pens, pencils, and erasers. Plus, because students are normally not permitted to leave their seats during class, it is tempting to use the desk as a personal trash can. Crumpled paper, used tissues, bent paper clips, and loose pencil shavings need a place to go, and the desk makes a convenient hiding spot.

Explanation

- Sentence 1 is transitional and too vague to be an argument.
- Sentence 2 raises this question: "*Why* is the inside of a typical fifth-grader's desk difficult to keep organized and clean?" The word *difficult* is debatable or

arguable (because we all define *difficult* differently), so it establishes an argument that warrants evidence and explanation.

- Sentence 3 begins to answer the question raised in Sentence 2. The rest of the paragraph provides the evidence and explanation to support the argument in Sentence 2.

Therefore, this is the topic sentence: *The inside of a typical fifth-grader's desk is difficult to keep organized and clean.*

Note: We will revisit topic sentences in Chapter Three, in the section on What Students Struggle With the Most When They Write.

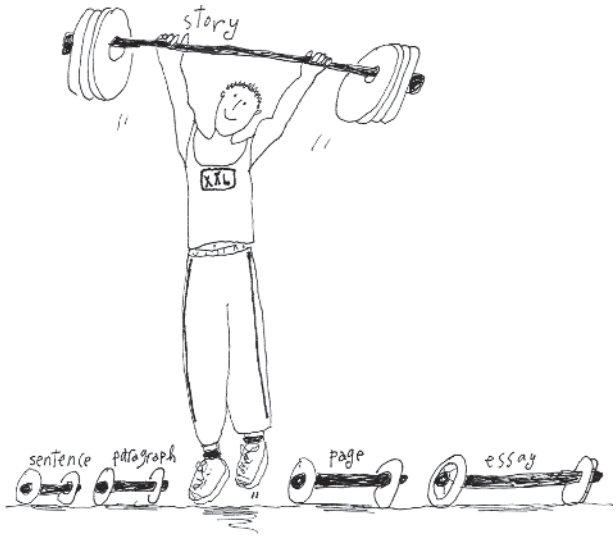
5. **Give students frequent opportunities to *summarize.*** Start small. Don't hand out copies of Homer's *Iliad*[46] and ask for a summary. One approach is to ask students to read an untitled passage and give it a title. Another effective technique is to give students quotations relevant to your current content so that they can practice one sentence at a time while simultaneously reviewing relevant subject matter. Shrinking a sentence is a form of summarizing.

"Wait a minute," I can hear someone saying. "Isn't that paraphrasing?"

Yes, and it is also summarizing because you are limiting the restatement to the Most Important Information. Think of *paraphrasing as retelling*, and *summarizing as highlighting*. Summarizing a quote makes a great Do Now, and when you appeal to students' competitive spirit, it increases engagement. The following example explains how.

> See if you can condense the following sentence to ten words or fewer:
>
> - "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude." (Ralph Waldo Emerson, from "Self-Reliance"[47])

Think of summarizing as weightlifting. You don't start by trying to bench-press 250 pounds. Begin instead with numerous light repetitions and build your way up to longer, more complex texts.



6. **Teach students how to figure out what's important.** Not long after our students did poorly on "main idea" questions on an interim assessment, several colleagues and I sat down and tried to figure out what we could do. The story of what we decided appears in Chapter Two, in the section on Nonfiction Versus Everything Else. It includes the What's Important Organizer, which also appears on the TLC "Analyzing Literature" page.

DOGGIE BAG

1. What is the "main idea" in nonfiction? What is the "main idea" in fiction?
2. Why do your students need to know the difference between argument and evidence, and how will you teach this?
3. How will you teach your students to find topic sentences?
4. What strategies will you use to strengthen your students' ability to infer the main idea or argument?

TLC DOWNLOAD ZONE FOR COMPREHENSION PROCESS

Sample PowerPoint for "cred"

Sample Root of the Week Hypothesis Sheet for "cede/ceed"

How to Paraphrase

How to Paraphrase: Third-Grade Practice

Paraphrasing and Inference Organizer

Open-Ended Response Writing Rubric

Quotations to Paraphrasing and Inference

Character Traits: Quote and Explain

Story Detectives

K–12 ELA Common Core Standards Tracking Sheet

What's Important Organizer