

Seriously, Syntax Matters:  
Critical Connections to  
Comprehension



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tomorrow

# Meet Your Presenter



## **Nancy Hennessy, M.Ed.**

Educational consultant and past  
president of the International Dyslexia  
Association

# What You Will Learn

- The role of syntax and sentence comprehension in extracting and constructing meaning from text
- The challenges presented by the syntax of academic language found in narrative and informational texts
- An informed framework that addresses both intentional and incidental instruction for sentence comprehension



*The science of reading includes more than word recognition...*



# The mighty sentence

*A bear, however hard he tries,  
grows tubby without exercise.*

*It matters not what someone is  
born, but what they grow to be.*

*Real courage is when you know you're licked  
before you begin, but you begin anyway and  
see it through no matter what.*

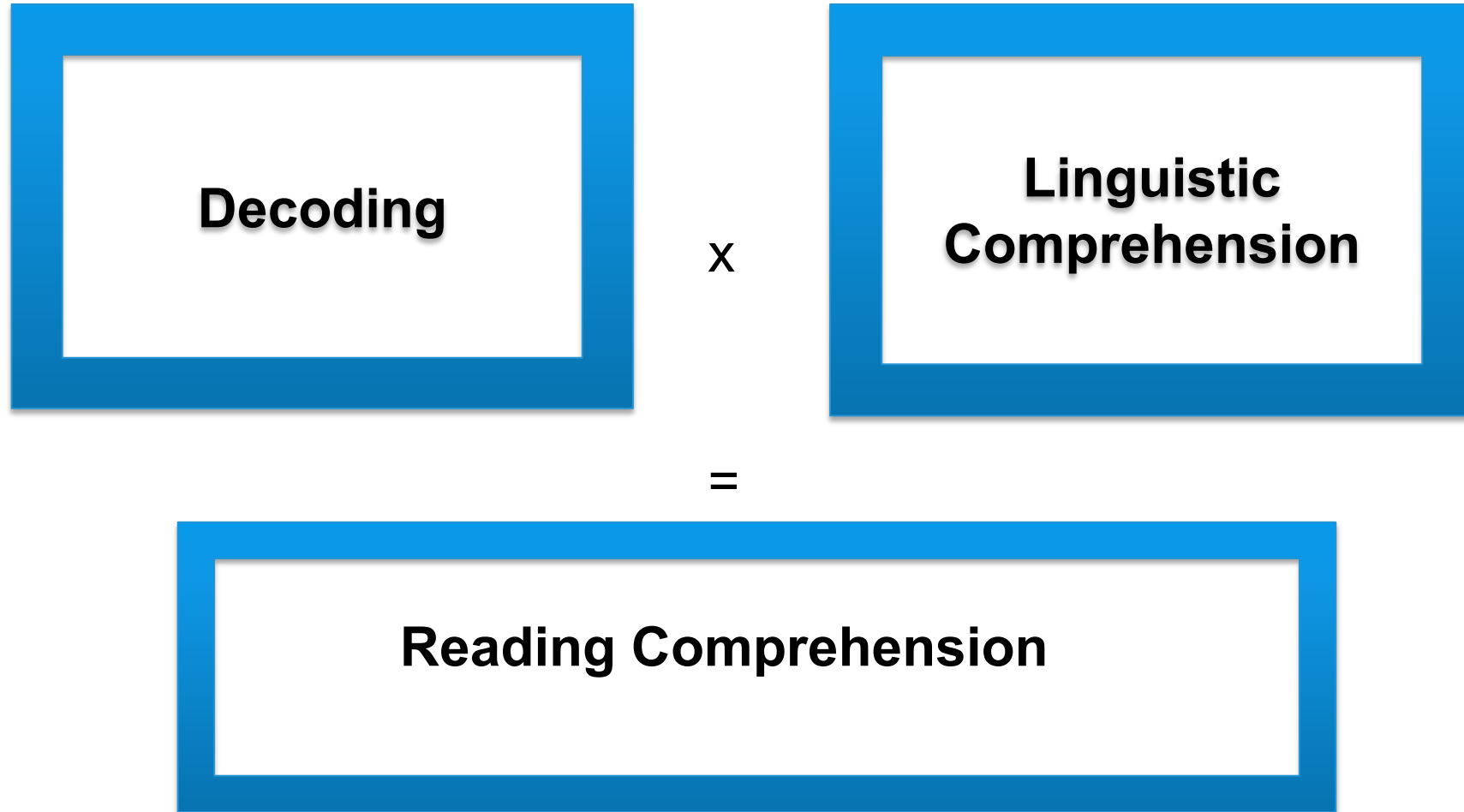


**What do we know  
about the contributors  
to reading  
comprehension**



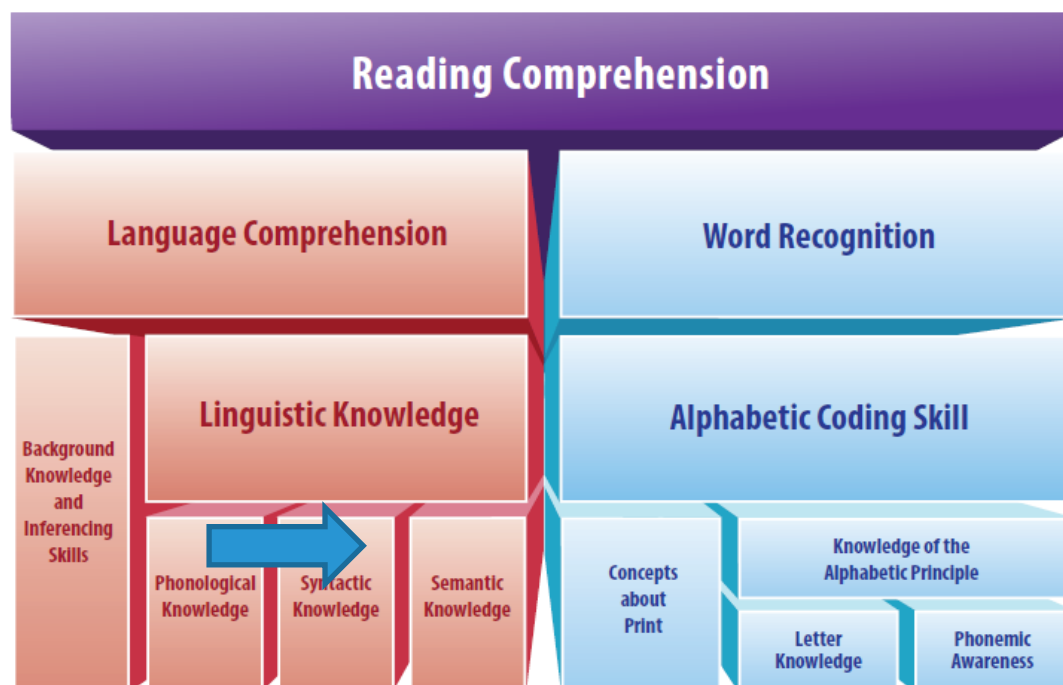
# The Simple View of Reading

Gough & Tunmer, 1986

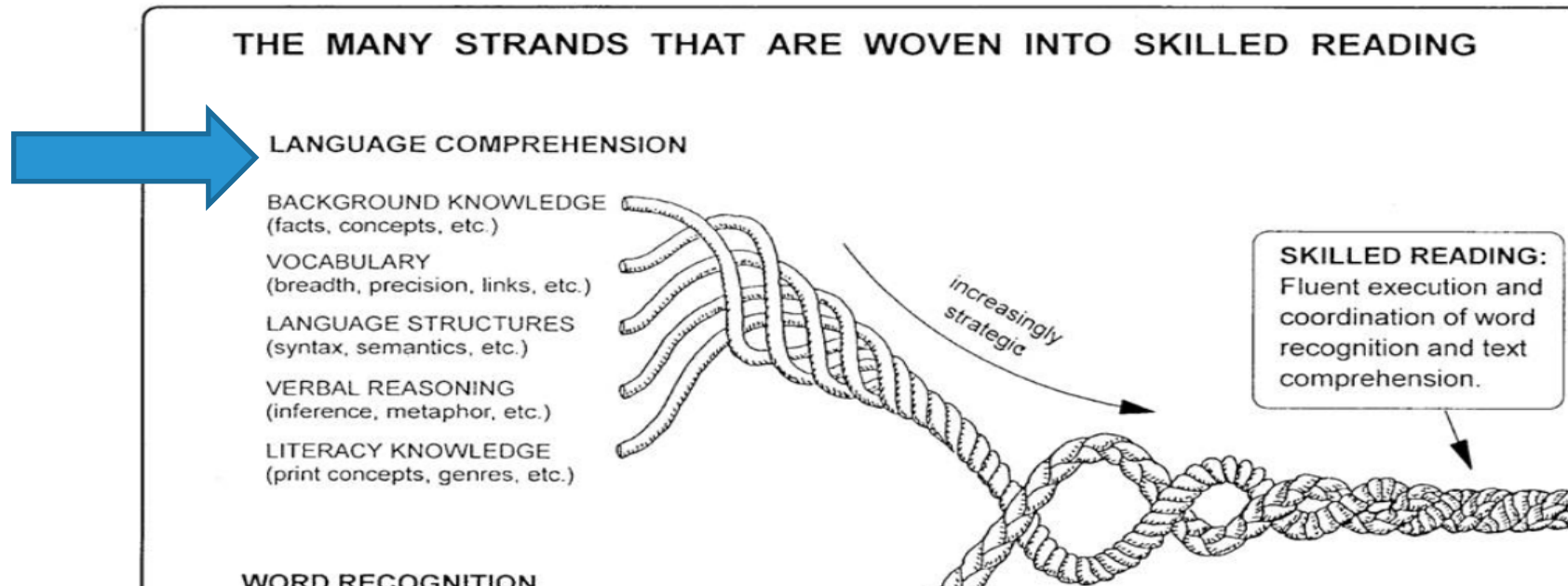




## Cognitive Foundations of Reading



Cognitive Foundations for Reading  
Acquisition  
(Hoover & Tunmer, 2020)



*Even if the pronunciations of all of the letter strings in a passage are correctly decoded, the text will not be well comprehended if the child (a) does not know the words in their spoken form; (b) cannot parse the syntactic and semantic relationships among the words; or (c) lacks critical background knowledge or inferential skills to interpret the text appropriately and “read between the lines.” Note that in such instances, “reading comprehension” deficits are essentially oral language limitations.*

Scarborough, 2001



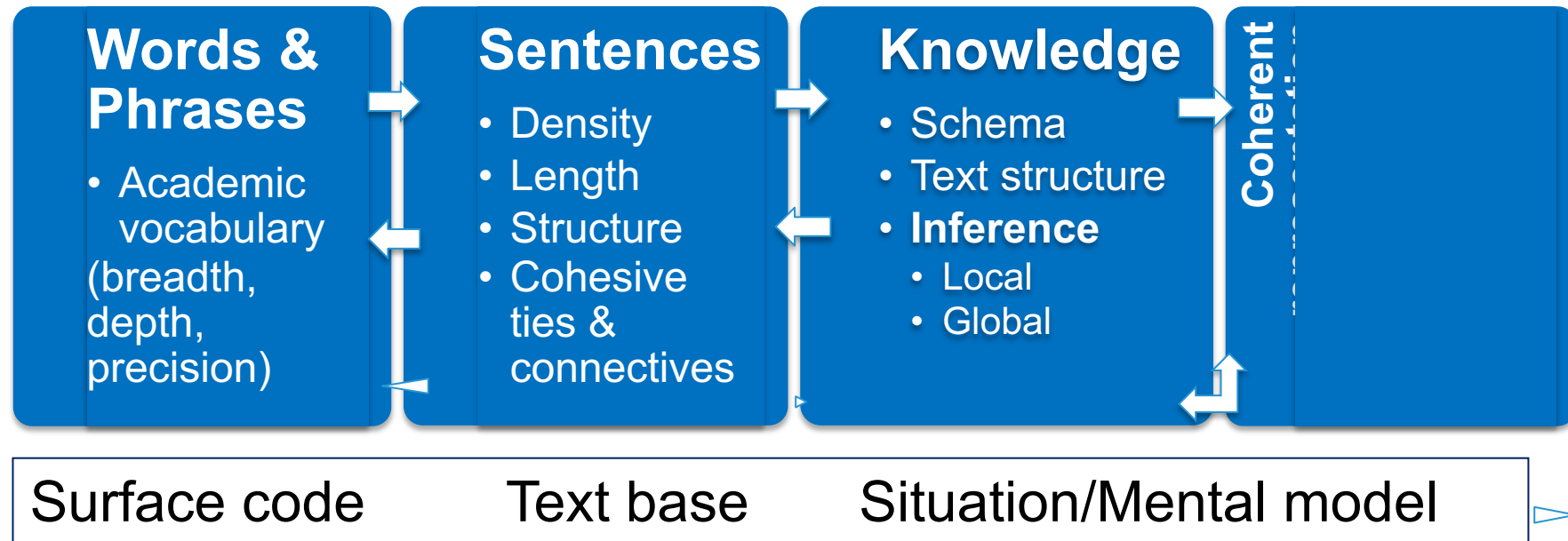
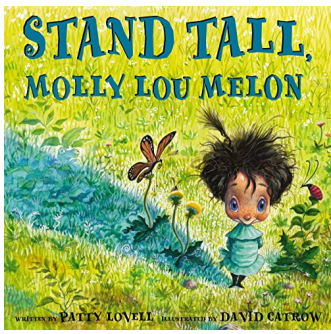
## *Comprehension of written text involves processing language at many different levels...*

*At the word level, the reader must decode individual words . . . **access meaning** of the words they hear or read.*

*At the sentence level, the comprehender needs to work out the **syntactic structure and sense of each sentence**. Simply deriving the meanings of individual words and sentences is insufficient.*

*In order to construct a mental model of the text, the comprehender needs to **integrate information from different sentences** to establish local coherence and to incorporate background knowledge and ideas (retrieved from long term memory) to **make sense that are**.*

*Oakhill & Cain, 2007*



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**What do we know  
about syntax and its  
contribution to  
meaning?**






# Quick Lexicon Check

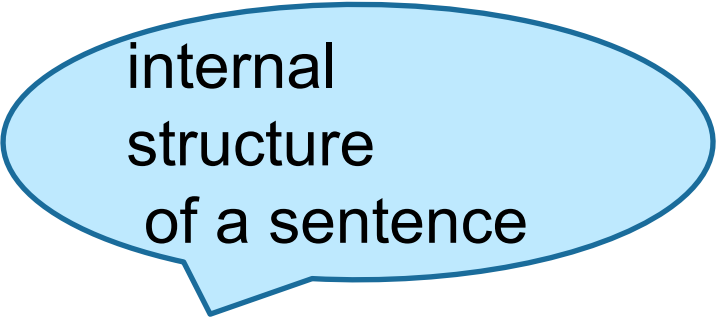


## Syntax

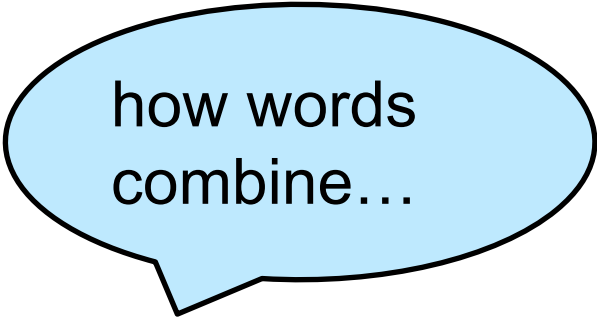
...the order and organization of words, phrases, clauses to convey meaning through different types of sentences.



arrangement of words...



internal structure of a sentence



how words combine...

*Words contribute to the meaning of propositions,  
whereas syntax provides the structure for ordering and  
organizing these idea units within the sentence.*

*Comprehending sentences involves extracting the  
meaning of interconnected sets of propositions (ideas)  
that, in turn, depend on semantics and the syntax used  
within the text.*

Hennessey, 2020

# Syntax is the workhorse of meaning...

Scott, 2020

*Syntax explicitly conveys information about how the word meanings should be integrated into a proposition so that the reader does not have to infer who did what to whom.*

Madsen & Poulsen, 2016



***Failure to use the syntactic information or slow processing could lead to limited integration of information and misunderstanding of the sentence meaning.***

***In this way, syntactic knowledge has the potential to be a very important source of individual differences in language comprehension skills.***

Poulsen & Gravgaard, 2016

**Do we have the  
necessary knowledge of  
how syntax/sentences  
work to support  
instruction?**



**Your knowledge...**

**Syntactic Forms**



**Syntactic Function**

# The Building Blocks of Meaning

Sentence types  
and their jobs

Clause types  
and their jobs

Phrase types  
and their job

Parts of  
speech & their  
jobs

## Focus Function

# Quick Write

**The sentence...**





**A sentence is...**

*...an abstract linguistic frame that has slots for categories of words and phrases.*

Hennessy & Moats, 2011

**A vehicle for conveying idea units...**

*Before the words slide into their slots, **they are just discrete items**, pointing everywhere and nowhere. Once the words are nested in the places **‘ordained’** for them—‘ordained’ is a wonderful word that points to the inexorable logic of syntactic structures—they are **tied by ligatures of relationships** to one another. They are subjects or objects or actions or descriptives or indications of manner, and as such they **combine into a statement about the world**, that is, into a **meaning** that one can contemplate, admire, reject, or refine.*

Stanley Fish, 2011, p. 2

*The reader must figure out **logical relationships between words** to construct meaning.*

*Those **relationships/idea units** are conveyed through **different types of sentences**.*

*The **structure of sentences** is a key to **understanding how idea units connect**.*

Hennessy, 2020

**Simple**  
**Compound**  
**Complex**  
**Compound-Complex**

# Why are some more difficult than others?

1. *There once was a velveteen rabbit, and in the beginning, he was really splendid. He was fat and bunchy, as a rabbit should be; his coat was spotted brown and white; he had real thread whiskers, and his ears were lined with pink satin.*

*The Velveteen Rabbit*

2. *When Benjamin grew to be a man, he discovered to make a decent living, he had little choice but to tend the tobacco farm his parents left him, a grassy hundred acres he called Stout.*

*Dear Benjamin Banneker*

3. *As they unwrapped the bundled layers, hundreds of treasures were revealed, including gold nose rings and necklaces, sparkling crowns, and huge war clubs usually reserved for the Moche's greatest warriors.*

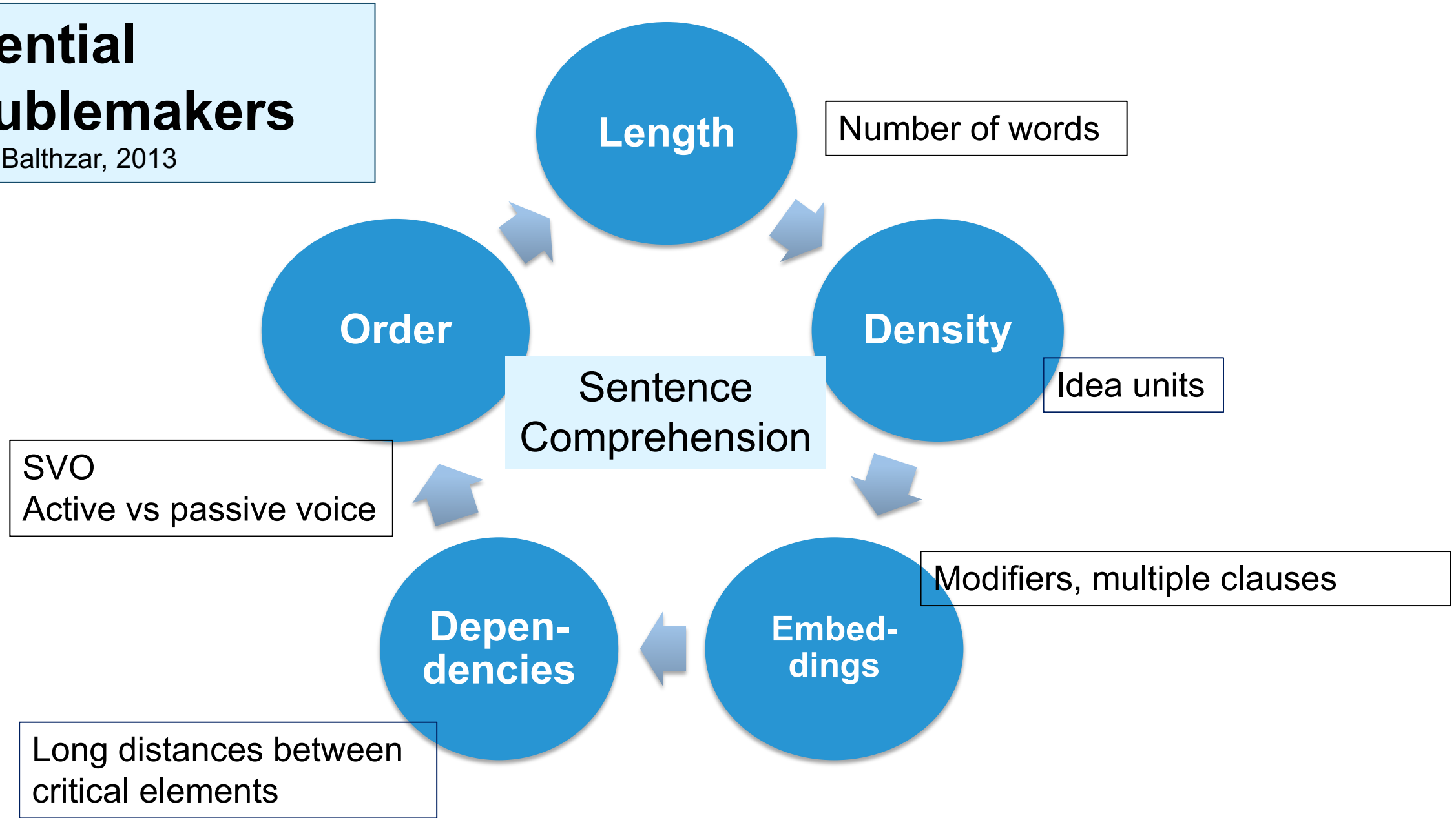
*The Mystery of the Tattooed Mummy*

4. *The Founding Fathers are a group of men who were key figures in initiating America's independence from Britain and establishing American government and early international relations.*

*The Founding of American Democracy*

# Potential Troublemakers

Scott & Balthzar, 2013





**What might we consider  
as we design informed  
instruction based on the  
reader & the challenges  
of the text?**



# General Instructional Guidelines

- ✓ *Many diverse learners will benefit from receiving instruction in both the oral and written modalities.*
- ✓ *Many students will benefit from being taught about sentence structure by strategically integrating reading and writing.*
- ✓ *Teaching will be more effective when explicit instruction on sentence structures is combined with opportunities to practice skills during activities embedded within the general education curriculum.*

Zipoli, 2017

# The Blueprint & Sentence Comprehension

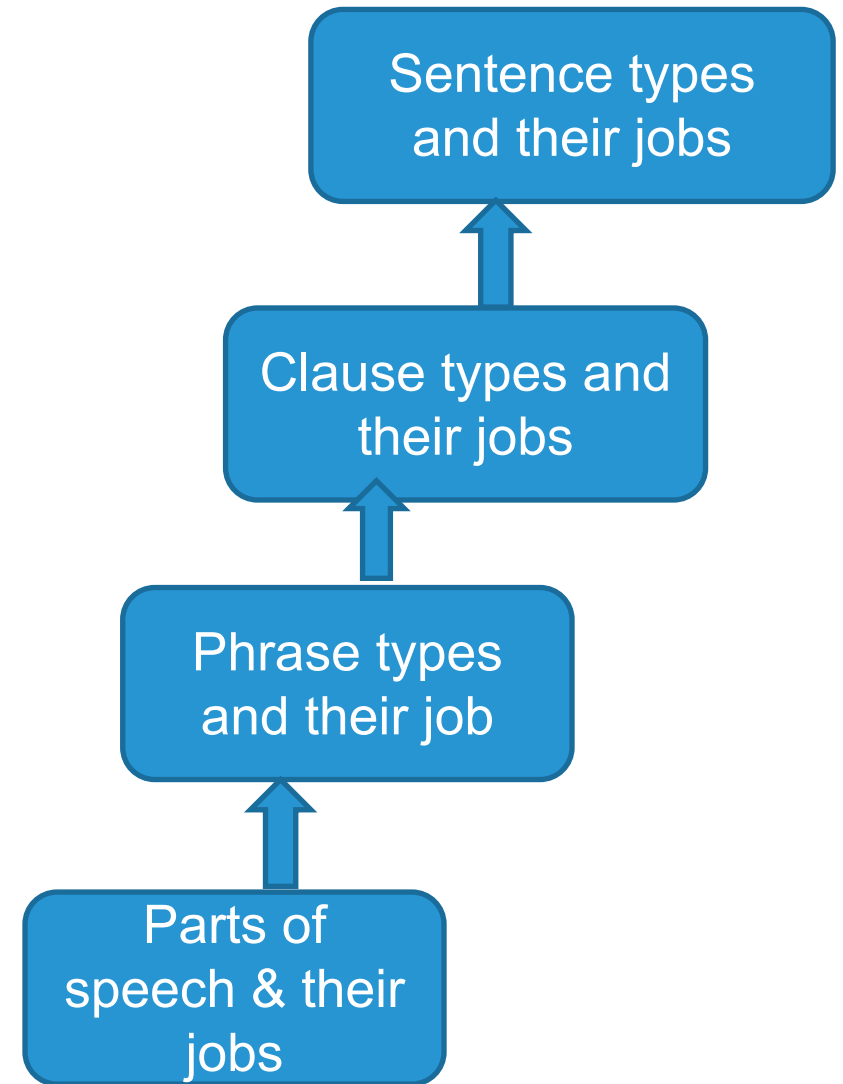
Are there parts of speech, phrases, clauses, sentence structures that may be difficult for your students?

How and when will you directly teach sentence comprehension?

How and when will you teach students to work with these structures?

How will you facilitate the integration of ideas e.g., the use of cohesive ideas and connectives? How and when will you teach students to work with these?

Hennessy, 2020



| Intentional on Purpose (direct)  | Incidental on Purpose (indirect)  |
|--|---|
| <b>Grammar Based Deconstruction Activities</b><br>-Parts of Speech<br>-Phrases & Clauses<br>-Sentences   | Reading Experiences<br>-Shared Reading<br>-Group & Independent reading<br>-The Fluency Connection |
| <b>Sentence Based Activities</b><br>-Writing Connections<br>-Sentence Combining & Expansion<br>-Anagrams<br>-Visual Representations<br>Pictures<br>Diagramming | Oral Language Experiences<br>-Teacher/Student Talk  |
| <b>Cohesive Device Activities</b><br>-Cohesive ties<br>-Connectives  | The Writing Connection<br><div>©2019 Nancy Hennessey</div>  |

# Parts of Speech

| Question | Part of Speech |
|----------|----------------|
|          | pronoun        |
|          | noun           |
|          | verb           |
|          | adjective      |
|          | adverb         |
|          | preposition    |
|          | conjunction    |

## Question

who, what or whose?

who or what?

is or was doing?

which one, how many, what kind?

when, where, how, why?

what's the relationship between the words before and after?

what's connected or needs to be glued together?

## Parts of Speech-Examples:

Pronoun-she

Noun-mummy

Verb-found

Adjective-powerful

Adverb-finally

Preposition-above

Conjunction-as

*The Mystery of the Tattooed Mummy*

Hennessy, 2020



## Classroom Activity: Words Working Together

**Prerequisite knowledge:** Understanding the role of parts of speech in constructing sentences

**Materials:** Sample Word Cards (words selected from sentences in current text)

Structured Question Organizer (questions related to function)

### Activity:

1. Teacher selects sentence(s) from current text. Sample sentence (selected from “The Founding of American Democracy,” *In the end, the Americans won the Revolutionary War and the British soldiers went back to England.*
2. Using the sample sentence, teacher models/reviews response to structured questions.
3. Teacher distributes sets of cards with individual words from current text and copies of question organizer. Students are instructed to work in pairs or small groups and use word cards to find answers to the questions.

Hennessy, 2020

# Word Cards

|           |           |              |             |            |
|-----------|-----------|--------------|-------------|------------|
| rights    | colonists | presidential | government  | allowed    |
| democracy | solve     | disagreed    | compromises | equally    |
| central   | each      | again        | interprets  | protect    |
| carefully | balance   | unfair       | branch      | federalism |

# Structured Questions

| <i>Who/what?</i> | <i>Is/was doing?</i> | <i>Which one, what kind, how many?</i> | <i>When, where, how?</i> |
|------------------|----------------------|--|--------------------------|
|                  |                      |  |                          |
|                  |                      |  |                          |
|                  |                      |  |                          |
|                  |                      |  |                          |
|                  |                      |  |                          |
|                  |                      |  | Hennessy, 2020           |

# Word Cards

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## Structured Questions

| <i>Who/what?</i> | <i>Is/was doing?</i> | <i>Which one, what kind, how many?</i> | <i>When, where, how?</i> |
|------------------|----------------------|--|--------------------------|
| rights           | solve                | central                                | carefully                |
| democracy        | disagreed            | each                                   | again                    |
| colonists        | interprets           | presidential                           | equally                  |
| balance          | balance              | unfair                                 |                          |
| government       | allowed              |  |                          |
| compromises      | compromises          |  |                          |
| branch           | branch               |  |                          |
| federalism       |                      |  |                          |

# Check Up!

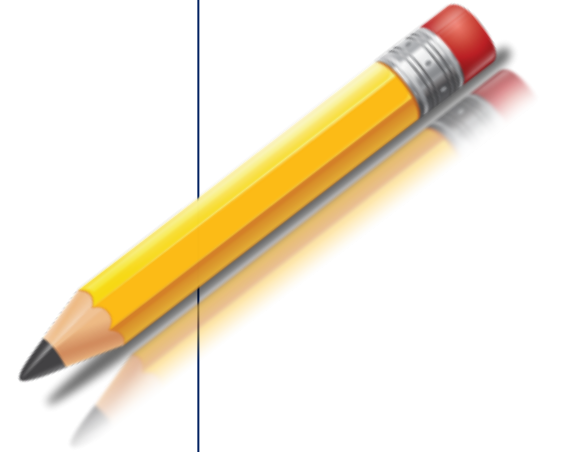
\_\_\_ *deep inside an ancient pyramid in Peru*

\_\_\_ *but what he lacked in polish and good looks*

\_\_\_ *a laughter as cold as frost*

\_\_\_ *most families owned a bible*

\_\_\_ *when he sat wedged in top of the Boy's stocking*



**Phrase or Clause?**

# Phrases

*...group of words that work together & answers specific questions.*

- ✓ noun
- ✓ verb
- ✓ adjectival
- ✓ adverbial
- ✓ prepositional

# Clauses

*...group of words with both a who and a do & answer specific questions.*

- ✓ dependent-independent
- ✓ relative, adverbial, object complement clauses

# Function

# Check Up!

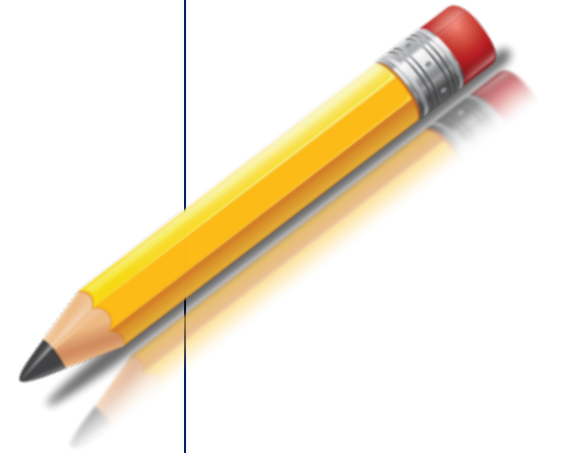
*P\_\_ deep inside an ancient pyramid in Peru*

*C\_\_ but what he lacked in polish and good looks*

*P\_\_ a laughter as cold as frost*

*C\_\_ most families owned a bible*

*C\_\_ when he sat wedged in top of the Boy's stocking*



**Phrase or Clause?**



| Intentional on Purpose (direct)  | Incidental on Purpose (indirect)  |
|--|---|
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| <b>Cohesive Device Activities</b><br>-Cohesive ties<br>-Connectives  | The Writing Connection<br>©2019 Nancy Hennesy   |

# Sentence Combining

| Targeted Pattern                                   | Question & Sentences   | Combined Response  |
|--|--|--|
| Adjectives & adverbs                               | How would you describe the ant?<br>The ant collected stores for the winter.<br>The ant was industrious.  | The industrious ant collected stores for the winter.   |
| Compound subjects & objects                        | How was Winnie feeling?<br>Winnie was afraid.<br>She felt disheartened   | Winnie was afraid and felt disheartened.   |
| Compound sentences using coordinating conjunctions | What was the colonists' attitude toward taxation?<br>The colonists resisted high taxes.<br>They fought taxation without representation.  | The colonists resisted and fought taxation without representation.   |
| Possessive nouns                                   | Why was a compromise necessary?<br>The representatives had different viewpoints.<br>These required a compromise.   | The representatives' different viewpoints required a compromise.   |
| Adverbial clauses using subordinating conjunctions | Why did the archaeologists spend months at the site?<br>The archaeologists spent months digging at a sacred site.<br>They were sure the tomb contained treasures.                              | The archaeologists spent months digging at a sacred site because they were sure the tomb contained treasures.  |
| Relative Clauses                                   | How would you describe Stalin?<br>Stalin was ruthless and ruled through fear.<br>He executed hundreds of thousands of his countrymen and committed multiple atrocities against his own people. | Stalin, who was ruthless and ruled through fear, executed hundreds of thousands and committed atrocities against his own people. <div>Hennessy, 2020</div> |

## Adjectives & adverbs

How would you describe the ant?  
The ant collected stores for the winter.  
The ant was industrious.

The industrious ant collected stores for the winter.

## Compound subjects & objects

How was Winnie feeling?  
Winnie was afraid.  
She felt disheartened

Winnie was afraid and felt disheartened.

## Sentence Combining

# Sentence Anagrams

*Rearranging words that are out of sequence into sentences and adding the correct capitalization and punctuation reinforces the concept of sentence and the grammatical roles of words in sentences.*

Hochman & MacDermott-Duffy, 2019

# Check Up

in

a

chirping

field

hopping

one

a

and

day

singing

grasshopper

hopping

*The Ant & The Grasshopper*

| Intentional on Purpose (direct)  | Incidental on Purpose (indirect)  |
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**Cohesive ties**-syntactic and semantic elements are necessary for bridging & integrating information within and between sentences and paragraphs.



Cohesive Ties



Connectives

**Pronoun referents**-author uses a pronoun to refer to a word found before or after in the text.

*Benjamin was telling Thomas Jefferson that he was a great man.*

**Substitution/synonyms**-author replaces a word or group of words in the text

*Benjamin was telling Thomas Jefferson that he was a great man.*

**Repetition**-author repeats a phrase in text.

*Benjamin was telling Thomas Jefferson that he was a great man. Jefferson owned slaves who he counted as his property.*

**Ellipsis**- author omits one or more words

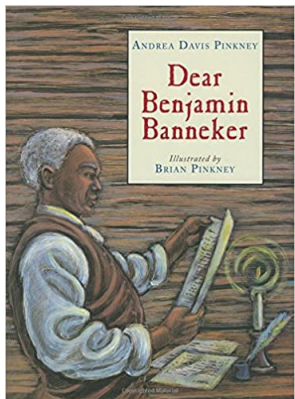
*Jefferson owned slaves whom he considered...*

Cohesive ties take their meaning from another part of the sentence or sentence.



# Cohesive Ties

As the first black man, to work on behalf of a president and as the only black person to accomplish the creation of an almanac, **Benjamin** knew he would be met with a range of emotions. He'd be scrutinized and criticized by some, applauded and praised by others.



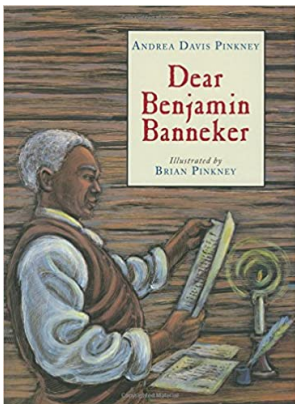
**Model:**  
**Frame a question**  
**Search for connectors**  
**Make them visible**

# Benjamin

substitution

pronoun

As the first black man, to work on behalf of a president and as the only black person to accomplish the creation of an almanac, **Benjamin** knew he would be met with a range of emotions. He'd be scrutinized and criticized by some, applauded and praised by others.

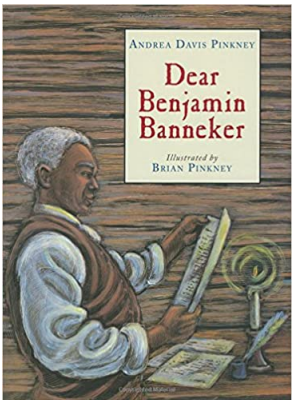


| Types                  | Examples   |
|------------------------|--|
| Additive               | and, in addition, furthermore                      |
| Temporal               | after, as, while, during                           |
| Causal                 | as a result, consequently, so                      |
| Adversative (Contrast) | instead, but, alternatively, although, even though |
| Conditionality         | Unless, if, if...then                              |

**Connectives** signal logical relationships between parts of sentences e.g., clauses and the sentence itself. They cue specific types of relationships between events.

# Connectives

Folks read almanacs to find out when the sun and moon would rise and set, when eclipses would occur... Farmers read almanacs so they would know when to seed their soil....and when they could expect rain to water their crops.



additive

temporal

causal

**Acknowledge**

**Act**



**Role  
Challenges  
Informed Framework**

**Affirm**

**Appreciate**



## Learn the Science of Reading

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- Learn to understand and recognize dyslexia and its warning signs
- Learn the structure of the English and Spanish language system
- Includes the *Teaching Reading Sourcebook* and *Assessing Reading: Multiple Measures* textbooks
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# Questions?



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7 Practices to Make Your Math Class More Equitable

April 15, 4:00 p.m. ET

Integrating the Science of Reading and Culturally Responsive Instruction as a Path to Equity

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