

J JOSSEY-BASS TEACHER

GRADES **K-12**



SARAH TANTILLO

The

Literacy COOKBOOK



A Practical Guide to Effective Reading, Writing,
Speaking, and Listening Instruction



Table of Contents

[Jossey-Bass Teacher](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Preface](#)

[Introduction](#)

[How to Use This Book](#)

[How to Use The Literacy Cookbook Website](#)

[Part One: Basic Ingredients](#)

[Chapter One: Comprehension](#)

[What Is Comprehension, and Why Is It Important?](#)

[My Theory of Comprehension](#)

[Why Background Knowledge Is So Important](#)

[Key Critical Reading Skill 1: Paraphrasing](#)

[How Can You Teach Students How to Paraphrase?](#)

[Key Critical Reading Skill 2: Inference](#)

[Key Critical Reading Skill 3: Vocabulary in Context \(and Vocabulary Instruction\)](#)

[Key Critical Reading Skill 4: Inferring Main Idea or Argument \(AKA Summarizing\)](#)

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

[TLC Download Zone for Comprehension Process](#)

[Chapter Two: Reading](#)

[Decoding + Fluency and Comprehension = Reading](#)

[Nonfiction Versus Everything Else](#)

[The Truth About Textbook “Reading” Tests](#)

[After-Reading Strategies](#)

[Reading Workshop: Something to Consider](#)

[TLC Download Zone for Reading](#)

[Chapter Three: Writing](#)

[Read Well to Write Well](#)

[Why We Write \(and Read\)](#)

[Punchy Insights, or How to Avoid Writing Like a Robot](#)

[A Simple Recipe for Writing Instruction](#)

[What Students Struggle with the Most When They Write](#)

[Thesis Brainstorming and Organizing](#)

[Teaching with Mentor Texts](#)

[Writing Workshop 101](#)

[Motivational Grammar](#)

[Rubrics and How to Spend Less Time Grading](#)

[TLC Download Zone for Writing](#)

[Chapter Four: Speaking and Listening](#)

[Why Oral Fluency Matters](#)

[How to Train Students to Listen and Speak Effectively](#)

[More Thoughts on Effective Speaking](#)

[Class Discussion Logistics](#)

[Socratic Seminars Made Easy](#)

[Book Talk Projects](#)

[TLC Downloads for Speaking and Listening](#)

[Part Two: Entrées](#)

[Chapter Five: Tasty Persuasive Writing](#)

[The Concept of Persuasion](#)

[How to Prepare Students for Persuasive Writing Tasks](#)

[Chapter Six: Reading, Writing, and Test Prep “Stew”](#)

[An Argument for Stew](#)

[Connecting Key Critical Reading Skills to Test Prep Instruction](#)

[Test Prep Tips](#)

[Connecting Writing to Reading Through Genre Study](#)

[Open-Ended Responses](#)

Chapter Seven: The Document-Based Question Approach

What Are DBQs, and Why Should Everyone Use Them?

Designing DBQs Across the Curriculum

Chapter Eight: Research Paper Guide

Reading and the Research Paper

How to Avoid RPT (Research Paper Torture)

Two Sample Research Paper Assignments

Research Paper Teachers' Guide

Chapter Nine: Teaching with Novels

Novels in English Language Arts: Literary Response Paper Writing Guide

Using Novels in History, Social Studies, and Science

Part Three: Desserts

Chapter Ten: Recommended Reading

On Reading and Vocabulary

On Writing

On Curriculum and Instruction

On How We Think About Teaching, Learning, and Change

Chapter Eleven: Appendix

[Index](#)

Jossey-Bass Teacher

Jossey-Bass Teacher provides educators with practical knowledge and tools to create a positive and lifelong impact on student learning. We offer classroom-tested and research-based teaching resources for a variety of grade levels and subject areas. Whether you are an aspiring, new, or veteran teacher, we want to help you make every teaching day your best.

From ready-to-use classroom activities to the latest teaching framework, our value-packed books provide insightful, practical, and comprehensive materials on the topics that matter most to K-12 teachers. We hope to become your trusted source for the best ideas from the most experienced and respected experts in the field.

For more information about our resources, authors, and events please visit us at: www.josseybasseducation.com.

You may also find us on Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest.



Jossey-Bass K-12 Education



jbeducation



jbeducation

The Literacy Cookbook

**A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE
READING, WRITING, SPEAKING,
AND LISTENING INSTRUCTION**

Sarah Tantillo

With illustrations by
Sandy Gingras

 **JOSSEY-BASS**
A Wiley Imprint
www.josseybass.com

Copyright © 2013 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights reserved.

Cover design: Jeff Puda

Cover images © Getty

Published by Jossey-Bass

A Wiley Imprint

One Montgomery Street, Suite 1200, San Francisco, CA
94104-4594-www.josseybass.com

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without either the prior written permission of the publisher, or authorization through payment of the appropriate per-copy fee to the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, 978-750-8400, fax 978-646-8600, or on the Web at www.copyright.com. Requests to the publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, 201-748-6011, fax 201-748-6008, or online at www.wiley.com/go/permissions.

Permission is given for individual classroom teachers to reproduce the pages and illustrations for classroom use. Reproduction of these materials for an entire school system is strictly forbidden.

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty: While the publisher and author have used their best efforts in preparing this book, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. No warranty may be created or extended by sales

representatives or written sales materials. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a professional where appropriate. Neither the publisher nor author shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages. Readers should be aware that Internet Web sites offered as citations and/or sources for further information may have changed or disappeared between the time this was written and when it is read.

Jossey-Bass books and products are available through most bookstores. To contact Jossey-Bass directly call our Customer Care Department within the U.S. at 800-956-7739, outside the U.S. at 317-572-3986, or fax 317-572-4002.

Wiley publishes in a variety of print and electronic formats and by print-on-demand. Some material included with standard print versions of this book may not be included in e-books or in print-on-demand. If this book refers to media such as a CD or DVD that is not included in the version you purchased, you may download this material at

<http://booksupport.wiley.com>. For more information about Wiley products, visit www.wiley.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Tantillo, Sarah, 1965-

A practical guide to effective reading, writing, speaking, and listening instruction / Sarah Tantillo; with illustrations by Sandy Gingras.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-118-28816-0 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-1-118-33376-1 (ebk.)

ISBN 978-1-118-33153-8 (ebk.)

ISBN 978-1-118-33489-8 (ebk.)

1. Reading. I. Title.

LB1050.T33 2012

418'.4-dc23

2012030716

First Edition

About the Author

Sarah Tantillo consults with schools (especially urban schools) seeking to improve student achievement. She taught high school English and humanities in both suburban and urban New Jersey public schools for fourteen years, including seven years at the high-performing North Star Academy Charter School of Newark, New Jersey, where she chaired the Humanities Department and her students achieved a 100 percent passing rate on the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) for Language Arts and Literacy. In addition to teaching, she also founded the New Jersey Charter School Resource Center and the New Jersey Charter Public Schools Association. She led the Resource Center from 1996 to 1999 and the Association from 1999 to 2003. Since 2007, she has coached K-12 schools on literacy instruction, curriculum development, data-driven instruction, school culture-building, and strategic planning. In 2009, she launched The Literacy Cookbook Website (<http://www.literacycookbook.com>) to provide teachers and school leaders with practical resources and strategies for literacy instruction. That Website formed the basis for this book. In her free time, she writes a blog called Only Good Books (<http://onlygoodbooks.wordpress.com>). Tantillo earned her B.A. from Princeton University, her M.Ed. from Harvard University, an M.A. from Johns Hopkins University, and her Ed.D. from Rutgers University.

Acknowledgments

This book represents a culmination of several decades of fortunate educational experiences combined with a lifelong obsession with what it takes to read and write well. Since the day I entered first grade, when my teacher, Mrs. Scholl, told us that her father named her Jewel because she was so precious, “and that is how I think of all of you, as my little Jewels,” so many teachers have blessed me with their expertise, enthusiasm, and love. Whether I was their student or colleague, they made deeper impressions than they probably realized, and I hope they see that now. I am also grateful to the thousands of students I have been lucky enough to work with and learn from. So many people have informed my thinking that I cannot name them all. Please picture me bowing here with gratitude.

I also recognize that I would be nowhere without the support of my family and friends, whose wit and wisdom buoyed me through this process. Again, while the list of those who deserve thanks is impossibly long, a few simply must be named. At many pivotal moments, Norman Atkins has invited me to dive into meaningful, instructive work (at North Star, TeacherU, and Relay), and I am thankful that he referred me to the wonderful folks at Jossey-Bass, especially Kate Gagnon, Tracy Gallagher, Robin Lloyd, and Sarah Miller, who have made this experience remarkably pleasant. And I am in awe of Jeff Puda for designing such a beautiful cover.

For many years, Sandy Gingras has been the proverbial stalwart ally, and I am thrilled to include her humorous illustrations in this book. PS: Sandy has written and illustrated more than twenty books, and her work can be found at the How to Live Website (<http://www.how-to-live.com>). Three other friends provided invaluable feedback

as I was drafting this manuscript—Steve Chiger, Rahshene Davis, and Katy Wischow—and I am grateful for their insights.

Last but definitely not least, I want my parents to know how much I appreciate their continuous encouragement, generosity, and support. They made countless sacrifices so that I could get a good education. I hope it was worth it.

Preface

Like any other avid reader, I used to think I knew a lot about reading. But most of those times I was wrong. I did well in high school and went to Princeton and thought I knew how to read: wrong. Graduated with a degree in comparative literature and was sure I knew what good readers do: again, wrong. Sure, I knew how to analyze poems, stories, novels, and plays. If pressed, I could translate Baudelaire. But on the day I started teaching high school English, I realized it didn't matter. After all of that schooling, I didn't know what to do with students who struggled to read.

Like many high school teachers, I'd expected students to know how to read by the time they reached me. Wasn't that the rule? Since I'd always loved reading, I had no idea what their problems were, much less how to solve them. Entering the classroom in 1987 through the Alternate Route, I had *no* training in how to teach reading and very little in how to teach writing.

As a result, when my students were confused, I was equally baffled. But I was determined to figure out how to help them.

So I did what I usually do to solve problems: I *read* about them and tried to apply what I was learning. Over time—far too long for some students, who suffered through numerous experiments with remarkable patience—I learned enough about reading and writing to be dangerous. My students passed state tests and went on to college. Based on those results, I felt like I had some useful ideas to share. So, after teaching high school for fourteen years, I left the classroom to become a literacy consultant.

That's when I began to grasp how little I truly knew.

My first clients were inner-city elementary and middle school teachers who wanted to put their students on a trajectory to college. They trusted me, since my students (from Newark, New Jersey) had all gone to college. But unlike me, they didn't expect their students to be fully formed adult readers or eloquent writers. They needed strategies. From me.

In a semipanic, I bought stacks of books, and they rescued me. They're cited throughout this book, and most are also listed in the Recommended Reading chapter. Working with teachers in dozens of schools, I tested and retested every approach I could find or create. Learning how to teach reading—comprehension, that is (I still know less than I would like to about phonics and decoding)—led me to develop ideas about *What I Wish I'd Known*. I created a Website called *The Literacy Cookbook* and began to write this book, thinking to myself, *If only I could go back and show my struggling first-year-teacher self how to teach students how to read and write more effectively.*

Alas, I cannot go back in time. But I am pleased to offer this book and the additional materials on my Website (<http://www.literacycookbook.com>) to you, in the hope that you might succeed with students where many, many times I failed. With nothing but the deepest humility, I submit these ideas to you and hope they help.

Introduction

One day while talking with an English teacher at a low-performing high school, I asked him what his biggest challenges were. He replied that the students' writing skills were “horrible” and added, “They don't read.”

I asked him, “How much of your time is spent teaching them reading skills or strategies?”

He admitted, “Not much,” and said that he didn't know what to do because “they aren't motivated.” Then he asked me for help.

Grateful for his invitation and having observed how tall his students were, I began with a basketball analogy: If you took a boy who'd never played basketball in his life—never played pickup, never had it in gym class—and threw him into the middle of a game, how would he feel? If he couldn't even do a layup, how “motivated” would he be? The same is true for reading. Sure, after you're born, you're supposed to be read to, but many children are not. And then when you start school, you're supposed to be taught how to read—but still some children are not. And then year after year, you struggle because no one is teaching you how to read—how to really dig into a book, how to fall in love with words—and then you get to high school and they expect you to be good at reading. And you're not. You're frustrated and your teachers are disappointed. And they aren't sure how to help you.

This scenario, sadly, is far too common, both for students and for teachers.

As one of my friends who is an English teacher recently remarked, English teachers have it hard. “The curriculum is like a big tent,” he said. “There's so much in there: reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary, novels, plays, poetry ... It's

hard to decide what to do and where to spend your time. Even if they hand you a curriculum, you're not sure how to prioritize everything.”

As confusing as it is for English teachers, literacy instruction is even more perplexing for teachers of other subjects. How are they supposed to teach reading and writing on top of World War II and photosynthesis? What are they supposed to do with students who don't like to read? How can they help their students comprehend the material? How can they help them write more clearly?

The purpose of this book is to provide *all* teachers (not just English teachers) with a coherent set of principles to inform their decision making around literacy instruction, including dozens of practical tools and directions—recipes, if you will—for how to teach reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The materials in this book (and on the accompanying Website) are aligned with the English Language Arts Common Core Standards and will definitely put your students on the path to college. (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.)

How to Use This Book

The book is divided into BASIC INGREDIENTS, ENTRÉES, and DESSERTS. Every so often you will also find a Doggie Bag of questions to take away and reflect on. These questions will help you review the material and ensure that you're on track to apply what you've learned. *Hint:* You might want to

preview these questions before you read each section, as they can also provide a useful guide to key points.

Where should you start? Although you can certainly dive in anywhere, it will make the most sense if you read through the BASIC INGREDIENTS first. The ENTRÉES then show compelling ways to combine the BASIC INGREDIENTS, and they offer detailed guidance on how to help students succeed at fundamental tasks such as persuasive writing, research papers, and test preparation. The DESSERTS section includes, naturally, a scrumptious recommended reading list and the Appendix, where you'll find a handful of extra-sweet resources.

The book begins with COMPREHENSION, explaining the comprehension process, the importance of background knowledge, and the four key critical reading skills. Note that COMPREHENSION is not just about reading comprehension; it's about comprehension in general. The “text” could be a written passage or a painting, a song, a funny smell, or even the defense on a basketball court. The comprehension process underlies everything that we do. How well we comprehend affects how much we learn in every subject.

The next basic ingredient, READING, describes what good reading entails, discusses the importance of nonfiction, identifies characteristics of different types of readers, addresses the values of independent and guided reading, and explains how to teach students to read strategically. This chapter includes an array of before-, during-, and after-reading strategies; advice on how to use textbooks more effectively; and some tips about reading workshop.

WRITING explores why we write and how to teach students how to write, period. This chapter also identifies what students struggle with the most when they write and provides solutions to these problems. It also offers an overview of writing workshop and explains how to use

mentor texts and rubrics, how to teach grammar, and how to spend less time grading papers.

SPEAKING AND LISTENING explains why oral fluency matters so much and reveals how you can train students to listen and speak more effectively. It deals with logistical challenges that teachers face during class discussions and describes how to run Socratic Seminars that will have students begging for more. Also included are descriptions of two Book Talk Projects that are guaranteed to keep audiences awake and engaged.

The **ENTRÉES** illustrate how to teach students to write persuasively in a way that is also tasty. These chapters also show how to connect reading, writing, and test preparation and how to write your own critical reading questions. If you don't know what DBQs are, you will probably be excited to learn that you can use the DBQ (Document-Based Question) approach no matter what subject you teach. In these chapters, you will also find a Research Paper Guide, a Literary Response Paper Writing Guide, and suggestions for how to use novels in history, social studies, and science.

In short, there is something here for everyone. In fact, there is more available than what is physically here! Throughout the book, you will find references (and if you're using an e-reader, hyperlinks) to numerous additional documents available on The Literacy Cookbook Website, <http://www.literacycookbook.com>. The directions that follow explain how to gain access to those materials.

How to Use The Literacy Cookbook Website

The Literacy Cookbook (TLC) Website offers hundreds and hundreds of documents that you can download instantly (<http://www.literacycookbook.com>). Plus, they are in Word format, so you can modify them easily.

This book comes with a one-time free thirty-day trial subscription and 50 percent off annual membership for those who would like to extend their access. New materials are added to the Website frequently!

To begin your one-time free trial membership, go to the TLC “Join or Renew” page: <http://www.literacycookbook.com/register.php>.

Then sign up (it takes less than a minute!) and enter the following code: TLCFREE.

You will receive immediate e-mail confirmation with your user name and password, which will then give you unlimited access to all of the files mentioned throughout this book, plus many more in The Download Zone. If you're reading this book with an e-reader and you're logged into the Website, simply click on the hyperlinks to instantly access any files you desire.

At the end of your free trial, you will be prompted to extend your subscription to a full year at half price. Simply click on the prompting link and sign up. You can pay by credit card in less than a minute. *Note:* If you need to pay via purchase order or check, you'll see directions on how to do that, too.

So, let's get started.

Part One

Basic Ingredients



If you read normal (food-based) cookbooks, you've probably noticed how much emphasis the authors place on using high-quality ingredients. One recommendation you see all the time is, "Always cook with wine you would be willing to drink." Although this may say something about chefs' drinking habits, the point is well taken: what you put into a meal will determine what you get out of it. The same is true for classroom instruction.

Throughout much of my teaching career, while I had a clear sense of how important it was to cook with good wine, I knew relatively little about the comprehension process or how to teach the skills involved in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. I muddled through and learned more as I went, but in retrospect I am sure I missed many opportunities to deliver lessons that were as delicious or effective as they could have been.

Some people think that excellent teachers are simply born that way. I believe they're wrong. While some individuals might possess wonderful instincts or charisma, every great teacher I've met has demonstrated a firm grasp of the content and skills that students need in order to succeed, and as my dad would say, these things are "fact-sensitive." In other words, you can learn them. You can master them. You can become great, too. The BASIC INGREDIENTS chapters will help you with that.

Chapter One

Comprehension

What Is Comprehension, and Why Is It Important?

In *When Kids Can't Read: What Teachers Can Do*, Kyleene 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

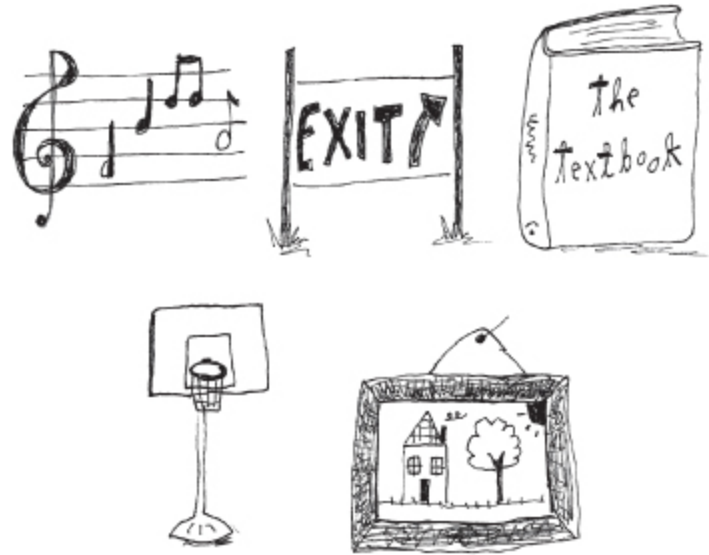
I know I'm not the first person to theorize about reading comprehension. Plenty of people have written on this topic. Nevertheless, I feel compelled to share my own theory. I think of it as "Climbing the Comprehension Process Stairs."

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 para-phrasing 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.”

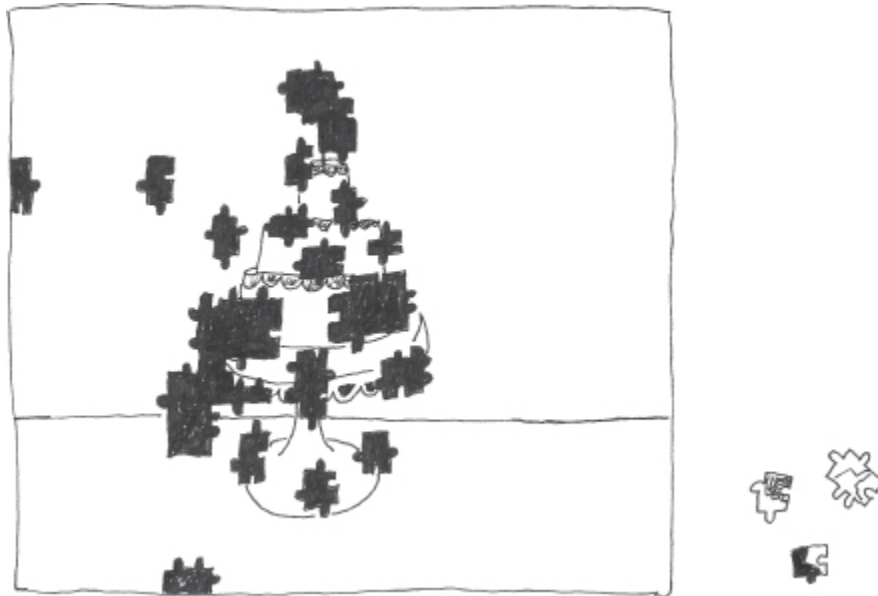
The inference that we draw takes the form of an explanation, and it becomes an assumption that we hold onto—that is, part of our “prior” knowledge—until it is challenged by new information. PS: In the next section, we'll look at how inferences and explanations are two sides of the same coin.

- 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 Sedaris⁵ and the first essay makes you laugh out loud, you'll expect the rest of the essays to do the same.