

Story grammar

Increasing reading comprehension

By the time children enter kindergarten, many enjoy listening to stories and are eager to learn how to read. For them, reading instruction focuses on phonological awareness and rules of print. When they enter the first grade, they still love listening to stories and are even more determined to read independently. However, as they progress through the elementary grades, children are faced with more complex reading material. There is a shift from rule-based phonological text (e.g., She pats the cat on the hat) to narrative text that emphasizes meaning and critical thinking. They are exposed to irregular words that do not follow phonological rules or sentences that do not have any particular patterns. Additionally, the academic demands placed on the student switches from decoding and learning to read to comprehension and reading to learn (Gardill and Jitendra, 1999).

Story grammar evolved from studies by anthropologists and cognitive psychologists who discovered that regardless of age or culture, retellings of stories follow a very distinct pattern.

Yvonne Bui
Doctoral Fellow,
University of
Kansas Center
for Research on
Learning

The shift in complexity of reading material may account for the significant problems that students with learning disabilities experience during the elementary grades (Swanson, 1999). Another contribution to the reading difficulties experienced by students with LD is their limited knowledge of text structure, the organizational features that serve as a frame or a pattern (Englert and Thomas, 1987) to help readers identify important information, make logical connections between ideas, facilitate understanding, and summarize text. The goal of teaching text structure is to make the underlying structure of expository and narrative text apparent to students rather than expect the students to infer the structure from

Yvonne Bui is a former first-grade teacher from John Muir School in San Francisco. She also taught a special education graduate course on Cultural Diversity and Communication at San Francisco State University. Yvonne is interested in developing and implementing research-based curricula methods to better meet the needs of students with disabilities in urban settings. She is working on her dissertation study, which is a writing intervention to help students with learning disabilities and low-performing students in the fifth grade prepare for the statewide writing assessment.

multiple exposure to stories and informational text (Carnine and Kinder, 1985).

One text structure that has been used successfully to increase reading comprehension of narrative text is story grammar. Story grammar evolved from studies by anthropologists and cognitive psychologists who discovered that regardless of age or culture, retellings of stories follow a very distinct pattern (Dimino, Taylor, and Gersten, 1995). The pattern in the retelling is the story grammar. In its simplest form, the pattern consists of

- a. the main character
- b. his or her problem
- c. his or her attempts to solve the problem
- d. the chain of events that lead to a resolution

(Mandler and Johnson, 1977; Stein >>>

Story Grammar Elements

Setting: Where and when?

- Place: where most of the action happens (e.g., house, school, beach)
- Background information (e.g., forest, city, country)
- Time: when most of the action happened (e.g., day/night time, past/present)

Characters: Who?

- Main Character(s): the person/animal that the story is **mostly** about
- Descriptive features of the main character(s): physical appearance, behavior, likes, and dislikes
- Other character(s): important people or animals that interact with the main character in the story

Problem: What and why?

- BIG PROBLEMS: the main character has a major dilemma or something bad happens to him or her (e.g., gets into a fight with her best friend)
- little problems: minor irritating situations or characters in the story (e.g., a bossy sibling)

Solution: Who and how?

- Hero: the person or animal who solves the problem (e.g., a parent)
- Plan: the hero creates a plan to solve the problem (e.g., ask friends for help)
- Result: the hero resolves the problem

Reaction to Solution: How?

- The main character's emotional response to the solution
- Other characters' responses to the solution
- May be stated or inferred from the pictures or text

>>> and Trabasso, 1982; Thorn-dyke, 1977). There is empirical evidence to support that story grammar instruction is effective in improving reading comprehension of narrative text for students with and without LD at all grade levels (Carnine and Kinder, 1985; Dimino, Gersten, Carnine, and Blake, 1990; Gurney, Gersten, Dimino, and Carnine, 1990; Idol, 1987; Idol and Croll, 1987; Short and Ryan, 1984; Singer

and Donlan, 1982).

Two approaches of story grammar instruction have been investigated to improve reading comprehension for first graders with and without LD in general education settings. The two different approaches were

1. story grammar instruction integrated with the students' personal experiences
2. basic story grammar instruction.

For this study, the pattern of the

story grammar encompassed

- a. setting
- b. characters
- c. problem
- d. solution
- e. the main character's reaction to the solution

(See *Story Grammar Elements* at left.)

During the integrated story grammar instruction, the students were first taught how to recall and reflect upon one type of personal experience per week: favorite places, important people, life problems, strategies to resolve problems, and different emotions. Next, students were taught how to identify the story grammar elements from picture books that were parallel to their personal experiences—setting, characters, problem, solution, and reaction to solution. After the students learned all five of the story grammar elements separately, they were taught how to integrate all of the story parts into a story map (see Table 1 on page 3 for a reference list).

For basic story grammar instruction, the students were immediately introduced to the five story grammar elements of setting, character, problem, solution, and reaction to solution (one per week). These students also identified the story grammar elements from picture books and were taught how to integrate all of the story parts and use a story map. A comparison group of students did not receive story grammar instruction and were taught a common prediction technique (predict what is going to happen next).

After six weeks of daily instruction, the results of the study supported story grammar instruction as a beneficial method to improve the ability of first-grade students >>>

Table 1: References and Suggested Picture Books

Story Grammar Element	References
Setting	Waterton, Betty: <i>A Salmon for Simon</i> Cannon, Janell: <i>Stellaluna</i> Allard, Harry & Marshall, James: <i>Miss Nelson is Missing</i> Crews, Donald: <i>Shortcut</i>
Characters	Pfister, Marcus: <i>The Rainbow Fish</i> Joyce, William: <i>Dinosaur Bob and His Adventures with the Lizardo Family</i> Munsch, Robert: <i>The Paper Bag Princess</i> Silverstein, Shel: <i>The Giving Tree</i>
Problem	Alder, Katie & McBride, Rachael: <i>For Sale: One Sister-Cheap!</i> DePaola, Tomie: <i>Little Grunt and the Big Egg</i> Mayer, Mercer: <i>There's Something in My Attic</i> Stevens, Janet: <i>Tops & Bottoms</i> Waber, Bernard: <i>Ira Sleeps Over</i>
Solution	Barrett, Judi: <i>Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs</i> Brandenberg, Franz: <i>I Wish I Were Sick Too!</i> DePaola, Tomie: <i>Strega Nona</i> Peet, Bill: <i>The Wump World</i> Steig, William: <i>Amos & Boris</i>
Story Maps	Gackenbach, Dick: <i>Harry and the Terrible Whazit</i> Monson, A.M.: <i>Wanted: Best Friend</i>
Assessment	(pretest) Bush, John & Paul, Korky: <i>The Fish Who Could Wish</i> (posttest) Henkes, Kevin: <i>Owen</i> (maintenance) Munsch, Robert: <i>Mortimer</i>

>>> with and without learning disabilities to comprehend narrative text (picture books). Figure 1 on page 4 illustrates the improvements in scores for each of the groups in the study. Significant gains on reading comprehension were made by the students in the integrated story grammar group. Subjects in the integrated story grammar condition outperformed both the basic story grammar and comparison group in their ability to independently retell stories and answer questions related to the story grammar elements. This

finding supports the notion that when students make connections between their authentic personal experiences and the classroom curriculum, they perform better on academic tasks. The two approaches to story grammar instruction were effective in improving the overall reading comprehension for all but two of the students in the experimental groups. (See Figure 2 on page 4, *Percentage of Students Impacted by Instruction*.) The increase in performance after the intervention was noted for all of the students with disabilities in

these two groups. The students who showed improvement also were able to maintain their reading comprehension skills after a summer break (three months). The individual students in the comparison group were less consistent, and almost half of the group either remained constant or decreased performance in their reading comprehension of narrative text from pretest to posttest. Based on these results, it appears that story grammar instruction provided to the experimental students both a framework to organize stories and a method >>>

>>> to extract the “big picture” from narrative text.

All of the students, including the comparison group, seemed to enjoy the intervention. The students were eager to listen to stories and anticipated which story would be read next. However, there was a noted difference on “active engagement” between the two experimental groups and the comparison group. This difference may be due to the fact that the experimental groups were told to listen “with a purpose” of searching out the highlighted story grammar element of the week. The students in the comparison group were not given any prior instructions and this may account for their passive or non-engagement. A memorable comment that came from one of the students with LD in the experimental group was, “Why didn’t anyone tell me this before?” Although it is important that educators read stories to students (especially those with LD) and encourage them to read independently, it is also imperative that we demystify stories by making the

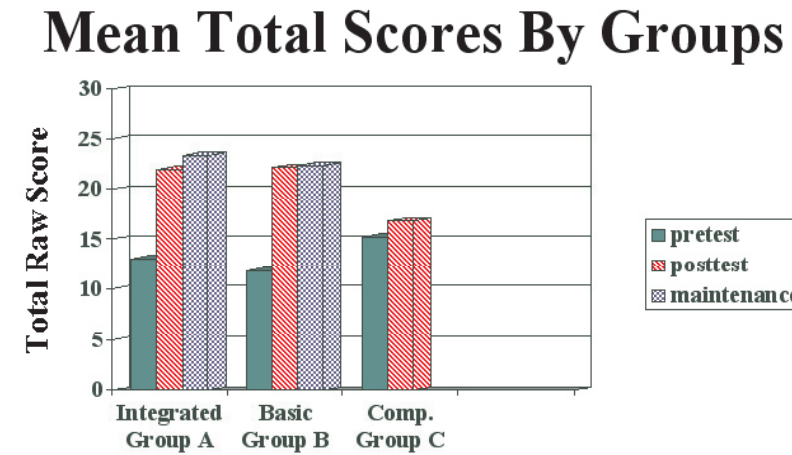


Figure 1

story grammar explicit. In this way, students can attend to and derive meaning from the entire story instead of focusing on a few minor details.

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Percentage of Students Impacted by Instruction

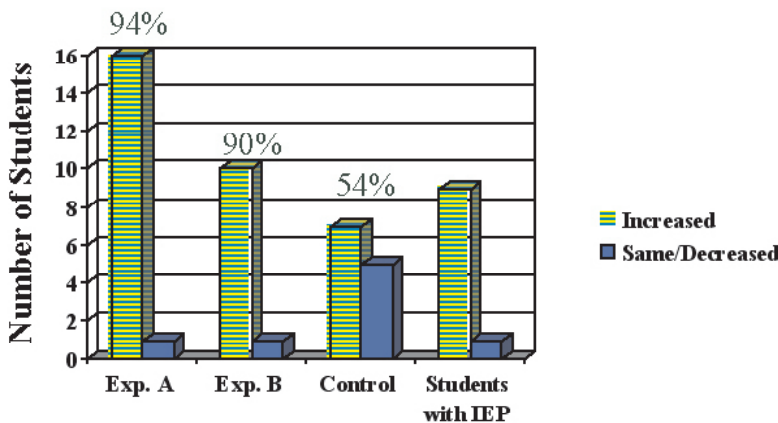


Figure 2

(Continued on page 7)

Recommended reading: Passages for Paraphrasing, Word ID

During a recent discussion about reading passages for the *Paraphrasing Strategy* and the *Word Identification Strategy*, SIM Trainers shared a number of creative suggestions. Their ideas are summarized here.

...

From **Jean Piazza**, Resource Teacher, Cody, Wyoming

I teach ninth and tenth graders in my Strategic English classes. When we are practicing DISSECT and RAP, I use articles from our school and local newspaper. Also, we read the first *Harry Potter* book for this purpose. I have also used the *Jamestown* reading materials, but found the kids were not too enthused by them. By using the newspapers, the kids immediately see practical application of the strategy. And with *Harry Potter*, even the “toughest” kids enjoy the book. The kids easily relate to the abusive situation Harry is in as an orphan as well as his struggles with self-identity, fitting in, and discrimination. Neither the newspapers nor *Harry Potter* come in graded stories with questions, but it is very easy to create my own questions.

...

From **Berna Levine**, Special Education Supervisor, Marietta, Georgia

I used to use newspaper and magazine articles for high school students

for *Paraphrasing*. Other sources were one-page stories about sports stars and celebrities.

...

From **Bob LuVisi**, Resource Specialist Teacher, Grass Valley, California

I haven’t specifically used these new materials for RAP or DISSECT, but I have been using them for fluency training. It’s called the *Adventure Series* from New Reader Press, and Tanya Reiff is the author. She has an excellent gift for writing to the older beginning/transitional reader audience. Reading materials hover around 2.5 GE.

...

From **Peggy Graving-Reyes**, Literacy Coach, Stockton, California

I’m currently using the materials:

- *What’s Happening in California?*
- *What’s Happening in the World?*
- *What’s Happening in the USA?*

All are authored by Lawrence Gable. They are one-page news articles written in an expository format. It’s the best I have found so far. Most paragraphs can be “rapped,” but occasionally some are not well written and have no clear main idea. Anyone can find out more about the products through Gable’s web site: whpubs.com

...

From **Alberta Roth**, Special Education Program Supervisor, Klein, Texas

My teachers use the *Jamestown* readers to get the students to practice/begin learning the strategy. The teacher should select the readings to meet student interest. The teacher then moves the student to *Release TAAS* selections (TAAS is our Texas State Accountability Assessment) at the student’s functioning level. Then they move students to appropriate text material.

...

From **Karen Koskovich**, Special Education Consultant, Dubuque, Iowa

I use the old *I Love Reading* series from Instructional Fair or the passages from the *Read Naturally* program. Both have elementary passages, and that is where I do DISSECT the most. If anyone has the old *I Love Reading* series and wants to know how many words are on each page, I have counted every word on each page of the first 11 books.

...

From **Vicki Cotsworth**, Site Coordinator, Kansas City, Kansas

If at all possible, we use students’ assignments to practice DISSECT and RAP. Students are motivated to read this material because it is assigned

In the Classroom

anyway. They need lots of assistance, but they know they need to complete the reading. This kind of activity works particularly well in groups where students can help each other.

...

From **Deb Fagan**, Instructional Specialist, Silver Springs, Maryland

I've used the high interest/low level reading materials published by Steck-Vaughn Co. The stories are short and clearly written; they come with comprehension questions at the end too. There are several series of books—adventure, mystery, biography, etc.

...

From **Sharon Saunders**, Staff Development Coordinator, Eagan, Minnesota

Our secondary folks use newspaper articles from the local paper that have been created for our statewide testing along with *Jamestown* reader materials. They use *The Wild Side*, *The Critical Reading Series* such as *Phenomena*, *Heroes*, *Eccentrics*, etc., *Timed Readings*, and *Timed Readings Plus*. They don't use fiction, only nonfiction. They also use the *Six Way Paragraphs* in the *Content Areas* books. We have liked the questions with the stories from *Jamestown*. They are done for you and bring in inferential questions that match our state testing. Some use *Read Naturally* materials.

Our elementary folks also use some *Jamestown* materials, *The Wild Side* again, *Goodman's Five-Star*

Stories. They also use the *Animal Adventure* books from Perfection Learning Corp., some use *Soar to Success* reading materials. They also use *Read Naturally* materials; however, the comprehension questions are weak—very easy. They also have some materials from *Hi-Noon*, such as *Bring the Classics to Life*, *Postcards from America*, *Postcards from South America*, *Postcards from Europe*, and the *Tom & Rickey Series*. Finally, some have materials from *Phoenix—New Practice Readers*.

...

From **Ruth Miller**, LD Specialist/Coordinator, Sacramento, California

At the college level in my reading classes, I did the following:

Word ID (partially modified from Emi Johnson)

Taught the steps of the strategy then did the “pre-test” with *Jamestown* materials (12th grade) with carefully selected readings. Students needing the practice and willing to set goals came in outside of class time for individual work. I also taught a spelling class using *Dixon-Englemann Corrective Spelling*. The two together helped students progress quickly. I used the *Jamestown* materials for three or four sessions then moved them to their regular college assignments. I no longer did formal testing, but would ask them, on an irregular basis, to tell me what they had just read or

actually have them read aloud to me.

Paraphrasing

Used current materials—news and magazine articles, and materials from textbooks in use in other classes on the campus. I then had a chance to do some teaching about the kinds of material they

would actually encounter, and we did a lot of group practice on these materials. However, I did use the *Jamestown* materials at the beginning. The criticism of those materials is quite valid, but I tried to select those with a reasonable sequence of ideas supporting a main idea. The reason for their use was one of time. (*Paraphrasing* was the last step in my reading sequence. I found that *Self-Questioning* and *Visual Imagery* were absolutely necessary to the comprehension process.)

My experience for the last 20 years has been post-secondary, but my feeling has always been that the students should practice strategies in the material they actually have to use.

...

Thanks to SIM Trainer **Nancy Sander**, Exceptional Children Consultant, Louisville, Kentucky, for starting this conversation in the first place.

Readability

Use your word processor to help you determine reading level

Sue Woodruff, a SIM Trainer from Muskegon, Michigan, shared the following tip for using Microsoft Word to determine the reading level of textbooks or segments of textbooks.

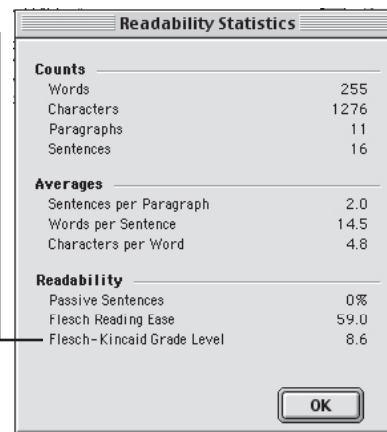
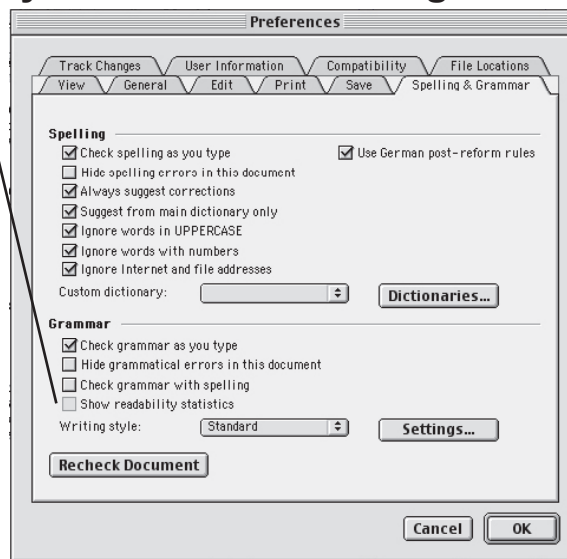
First, Woodruff said, type a few paragraphs from your textbook into a new Word document. Then, select the Spell Check button from your toolbar or select Spelling and Grammar from your Tools drop-down menu. If Readability Statistics are not displayed, do the following:

(Editor's Note: The following instructions are for Word 2001 for the Macintosh. If you use a PC or another version of Word, you may have to take different steps to display readability statistics. Consult your user manual or Word's help files for more information.)

1. Select the Edit drop-down menu.
2. Select Preferences.
3. Select the Spelling & Grammar tab.
4. At the bottom of the box are options for Grammar. Check the "Show readability statistics"

tics" box. Now after you have finished spell checking a document, Word will display an informational box among other things, the reading level of the text in the document. The readability level is the last statistic listed in the box: "Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level."

"The readability of a textbook is based on the number of words per sentence and the number of syllables per word," Woodruff said. "For accuracy on your total text, you may want to type four or five different samples to get an average readability. However, if you are pulling a segment of critical text for students to read, you could determine the readability of that specific segment as well."



Story grammar, continued from page 4

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