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"What's the Main Idea?": Using Text Structure to Build Comprehension

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The structure of a text can be used as a framework for accelerating students' comprehension. The authors share an evidence-based model of text structure instruction for any classroom.

Reading comprehension, or understanding the text, is the ultimate goal of reading and is essential for success in life. However, reading comprehension is a complex construct, encompassing many skills such as vocabulary knowledge, inferencing abilities, metacognition, awareness of text structure, and getting the "gist" of the text (Cain et al., 2020). Thus, explicit instruction on reading comprehension strategies is necessary to help students disentangle the skills needed for deep comprehension of text (Shanahan, 2020; Shanahan et al., 2010). This article presents a strategy (Framework for Accelerating the Strategic Comprehension of Text [FASCT]) to support students reading comprehension abilities by explicitly teaching students to use the structure of a text to support the development of the main idea statement and then expand this main idea statement into a summary by adding key details.

In the construction-integration model of reading comprehension, Kintsch (2013) suggests that when readers are cognizant of the hierarchical organization of a text, or the text structure, they are better able to integrate their prior knowledge with the information presented in the text as well as recall important ideas from the text. Furthermore, research has shown that students who are proficient at generating a main idea and summary after reading tend to understand the text at a deeper level (e.g., synthesis, analysis, evaluation) because of their ability to connect ideas from the text together in a logical manner (Kendeou & van den Broek, 2007; Meyer, 1975; Meyer et al., 1980). Thus, teachers can provide a solid foundation for students' reading comprehension development by explicitly teaching main idea and summarization strategies that are important for understanding the text (Williams et al., 2016).

Using Text Structure to Support Reading Comprehension

Research (Meyer, 1975) has demonstrated that most texts are organized by one or a combination of two or more specific text structures: sequence, description, comparison, problem–solution, and cause–effect. Teachers can use these text structures to build students' comprehension, which is well supported in the research (Bogaerds-Hazenberg et al., 2020; Hebert et al., 2016; Wijekumar, Meyer, & Lei, 2012, 2013; Wijekumar et al., 2014, 2020; Williams et al., 1994, 2016). Williams et al., (2016) examined the effectiveness of teaching second-grade students to identify text structures while reading expository text and found that it increased students' ability to

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get the "gist" and generate a summary of the text. This finding is promising as expository text tends to be more difficult for students to understand than narrative text (Williams, 2018). Furthermore, elementary students who were taught to identify the central event and outcomes (i.e., cause and effects or problem and solutions) of a narrative text were better able to understand the theme of the story than students in a comparison group (grades 2–3: Williams et al., 2002; grade 5: Williams et al., 1994).

Specific to the strategy presented in this article, Wijekumar & colleagues (2012, 2013, 2014) have implemented FASCT with fourth- and fifth-grade students in high-poverty, rural, and suburban schools. In these studies, the researchers trained classroom teachers on text structure instruction and provided students with access to an instructional, web-based text structure software (Intelligent Tutoring System for the Text Structure Strategy) that replaced 30–40 minutes weekly of language arts classroom instruction. Mirroring the steps outlined in the next section, the web-based text structure instruction, which included modeling, practice activities, assessment, and feedback, required students to (1) identify the overall structure of the text, (2) generate a main idea using the structure of the text, and (3) develop a summary using the main idea statement and text structure as a scaffold. Across studies, students who received the text structure instruction performed statistically significantly better on reading comprehension assessments than their control counterparts.

Text Structure Instruction

Popular reading textbooks for the elementary grades commonly utilize reading comprehension strategies such as text structure, main idea, and summary (Beerwinkle et al., 2020). However, it has been noted that reading textbooks rarely provide students with sufficient time for guided practice of these strategies, with an average of three to six lessons devoted to instruction on main idea and summarization, respectively, across textbooks (Beerwinkle et al., 2018, 2020).

Differing from the typical text structure strategy instruction found in textbooks, FASCT provides explicit text structure instruction for students, scaffolds their learning, and asks students to generate a main idea statement and summary based on the text structure after every text read. Thus, FASCT provides students with consistent, daily practice using text structures as a strategy to support reading comprehension.

Moreover, while text structures are often linked to expository text, we suggest that FASCT instruction can use any genre or type of text (e.g., picture books, poems, articles) because almost every text, regardless of genre, has an underlying text structure. For example, narrative texts often ask students to identify the story's theme or complete a plot diagram of the events. However, as Williams & Pao (2011) highlight, "many narratives have meaning beyond the plot level" (p. 255), and recognizing the problem and solution or cause and effect (i.e., central event and the outcome) may be critical to higher-order comprehension of the text (Williams et al., 2002). Thus, using a problem and solution or cause and effect text structure may help students study key narrative ideas as they align well with a plot diagram. The cause is the rising action, the problem is the climax, and the solution is the story's resolution.

Furthermore, FACST is designed to be a 10- to 15-minute daily routine and can be combined with other grade-level standards. For example, a teacher may take the first 10–15 minutes of a reading block to implement FASCT instruction with a read-aloud and then move on to discuss another skill outlined by the grade-level scope and sequence. While it is expected that upper-grade students write their own main idea statement and summary after every text read, primary grade teachers can orally scaffold the development of the main idea and summary through think-alouds, peer collaboration, and shared writing. The ultimate goal of all FASCT instruction is for students to gain proficiency at generating a main idea statement and summary after every text read, thereby giving students the necessary practice with these often-difficult skills and aiding their understanding of the text at a deeper level.

Before FASCT instruction, teachers should follow best practices for reading aloud to students by activating background knowledge, previewing vocabulary that is critical to comprehension (Harmon & Wood, 2018), and reading the text aloud with expression and intonation in order to serve as a model of fluent reading for students (Rasinski et al., 2009) as well as stopping to think-aloud or ask questions while reading. After the text has been either read aloud or independently, teachers may begin FASCT instruction following the steps outlined below (see Wijekumar et al., 2020, for more details).

Step 1: Identify the Overall Text Structure

While several text structures may be included within one piece of text, identifying the overall structure of a text will guide the next steps of the FASCT lesson. Table 1 presents the guiding questions to help identify the text structure after reading. FASCT typically focuses on the three text structures of comparison, cause–effect, and problem–solution because sequence and description structures often are nested within the higher-order structures (Meyer & Wijekumar, 2007; Wijekumar et al., 2012). For example, an expository history text may sequence events chronologically yet can be studied as a series of causes and effects. For example, the Townshend Act of 1767 (cause) led to the Boston Massacre 1770 (effect) and the Boston Tea Party 1773 (effect).

Furthermore, these three text structures promote higher-order thinking skills (Wijekumar et al., 2017). For example, consider the classic story of The Three Little Pigs, a tale often used in the primary grades to teach sequencing—First, the wolf went to the house made of straw. Next, the wolf went to the house made of sticks. Finally, the wolf went to the house made of bricks. However, this text could be viewed as a problem–solution text structure with sequencing embedded within: The problem is that the wolf wanted to eat the pigs. The solution is that the pigs made a strong house of bricks to keep the wolf out.

When thinking about our reading comprehension instruction goals and the aim of developing critical thinking skills within our students, is it more important for the students to know the sequence of events or for the students to be able to explain what the problem was and how it was solved? If teachers limit their discussion with students to only sequencing the text's events, they may be missing out on opportunities for students to develop higher-order critical thinking skills.

Step 2: Develop the Main Idea Statement

The crux of the FASCT lesson is using the structure of a text to scaffold the development of a main idea statement by using simple, consistent sentence stems (see Table 1). FASCT expects students to use these text structure-specific main idea sentence stems to generate a main idea statement after every text read, regardless of genre. The use of simple sentence stems reduces the cognitive load

Table 1
Main Idea and Summary Quick Guide

	Comparison	Cause and Effect	Problem and Solution
Questions to Ask Yourself	Did I read about differences and similarities of something?	Did I read about something happening and why it happens?	Is something bad happening? Was it solved? Do I see a cause for the problem?
Main Idea Stem	_____ and _____ were compared on _____, _____, and _____.	The main cause is _____, and the main effect is _____.	The cause of the problem is_____. The main problem is _____, and the main solution is _____.
Recall/ Summary Stem	The first topic of comparison is _____. [The topic] is/ has [state what was learned about the topic for that specific comparison category]. In contrast (or another signaling word), the second idea is _____. [The topic] is/ has [state what was, learned about the topic]	The cause was _____ [state what was learned about the cause]. The effect of this cause was _____ [state what was learned about the effect]. [Repeat for each cause/ effect]	The problem was _____ [state a description of the problem and, if known, its cause(s)]_____. The solution was _____ [state a description of the solution and how it gets rid of the cause(s) of the problem(s) or tries to]_____. [Repeat for each problem and solution]

for students, allowing them to focus on the text's overall gist.

Rather than explicitly telling students the main idea, teachers could model the thinking involved in creating a main idea statement using the appropriate sentence stem for the text structure. Over time, students can become involved by orally saying the main idea statement to a partner or contributing to developing the main idea sentence through a shared writing activity. Once writing proficiency progresses, students can begin generating and writing their main idea statements independently using the text structure sentence stems. See Table 2 for example dialogues between a teacher and students after reading a narrative and expository text.

Step 3: Expand the Main Idea Statement into a Summary

Once students can identify and state the main idea, they have a starting point for effectively summarizing the text that was heard or read. FASCT teaches students that a summary is simply an extension of the main idea. Thus, the text structure and the main idea statement help clue students into the details they need to pay the most attention to when creating their summary. Students are directed to use the main idea statement and add supporting details after each part to create a summary. See Table 3 for examples in narrative and expository of extending the main idea statement into a summary.

Closing Thoughts

While comprehension instruction is only one part of the overall literacy block, it may be an essential component for creating proficient readers. By incorporating daily instruction on generating a main idea and summary using the structure of a text, teachers can help students develop logical connections between ideas in the text, leading to improved comprehension (Kendeou & van den Broek, 2007; Meyer, 1975). FASCT is an efficient and evidence-based method that provides students with the repeated practice needed for successfully getting the "gist" of a text, thereby building a solid foundation from which students' complex comprehension skills can grow.

Table 2
Generating the Main Idea

Narrative Example: *The Last Stop on Market Street* (de la Peña, 2015)	Expository Example: *Animal Architects, Busy Birds* (Romero, 2019)
Teacher*: Was there a problem in our story today? What was the main problem in this story?* Students*: CJ doesn't like riding the bus and visiting the soup kitchen every Sunday after church.* Teacher*: Great job! The problem is that CJ doesn't like riding the bus and visiting the soup kitchen every Sunday after church. What caused CJ to feel this way?* Students*: CJ's grandma doesn't have a car, and they are catching the bus in the rain.* Teacher*: That's correct! How was this problem solved?* Students*: Nana teaches CJ to see, hear, experience, and appreciate the ride and his community in a new way.* Teacher*: Great! Now let's put it all together in our problem and solution sentence stem. The cause of the problem is CJ and Nana don't have a car and have to catch the bus in the rain. The problem is CJ doesn't like riding the bus and going to the soup kitchen every Sunday after church and the solution is Nana teaches him to see, hear, experience, and appreciate the ride and his community in a new way.*	Teacher*: Did I read about differences and similarities of something?* Students*: Different types of birds…Sociable Weaverbird, Red Ovenbird, Baya Weaver, Bowerbirds.* Teacher*: Yes! Birds are being compared. How were the different types of birds being compared? What was being compared?* Students*: The birds' homes…the type of home they live in, what they use to build it, and the purpose of it.* Teacher*: Great! Now how can we put the comparison into our sentence stem?* Students*: Sociable Weaverbirds, Red Ovenbirds, Baya Weavers, and Bowerbirds were compared on their types of homes, materials used to build their homes, and the purpose of their home.*

Table 3
Generating the Summary Using the Main Idea

Narrative Example: *The Last Stop on Market Street* (de la Peña, 2015)	Expository Example: *Animal Architects* (Romero, 2019)
Teacher*: Great, we have the main idea statement, so let's generate a summary now. What are some supporting details about the cause of the problem?* Students*: CJ sees his friend drive by in a car.* Teacher*: Yes! What are some details about the cause of this problem?* Students*: CJ asks why they don't have a car. CJ asks why they have to go to the soup kitchen every Sunday when his friends don't have to go anywhere.* Teacher*: Great, last step. Let's think about some details from our story about the solution.* Students*: Nana tells CJ they don't need a car. She teaches CJ to pay attention to the tiny moments on the bus ride like the sounds of the guitar, the jokes told by the bus driver, and the butterflies in the jar being held by a passenger.* Teacher*: Now, let's add all of those details to our main idea statement to make a strong summary.* Summary (details added to main idea statement are underlined): *The cause of the problem is CJ and Nana don't have a car and are catching the bus in the rain.* *CJ sees his friend Colby drive by in a car with his dad and wave. The problem is CJ doesn't like riding the bus and visiting the soup kitchen every Sunday after church. CJ asks why they don't have a car and why do they have to make this trip every Sunday when his friends don't have to go anywhere. The solution is Nana teaches him to see, hear, experience, and appreciate the ride and his community in a new way. By paying attention to the tiny moments on the drive, like the sounds of a guitar, the bus driver's jokes, and butterflies in the jar being held a passenger, CJ learned to see beautiful all around him.*	Teacher*: Great, we have the main idea statement, so let's generate a summary now. What are some supporting details about each comparison? Let's start with some details about each birds' type of home.* Students*: Sociable Weaverbirds live in a drooping over tops of trees. Red Ovenbirds live in a dome. Baya Weavers live in a bag-like home that hangs from a tree. Bowerbirds live in a grass hut.* Teacher*: Yes! What are some details about the materials they use?* Students*: Sociable Weaverbirds use sticks and soft grass. Red Ovenbirds use mud and clay. Baya Weavers use long strands of leaves and grass. Bowerbirds use rocks, moss, nuts, and shells.* Teacher*: Yes! What are some details about the purpose of their home?* Students*: Sociable Weaverbirds, Red Ovenbirds, and Baya Weavers homes are for protection from predators. Bowerbirds' homes are to attract a mate.* Teacher*: Great, let's add all of those details to our main idea statement to make a strong summary.* Summary (details added to main idea statement are underlined): *Sociable Weaverbirds, Red Ovenbirds, Baya Weavers, and Bowerbirds were compared on their types of homes, materials used to build their homes, and the purpose of their home. Sociable Weaverbirds live in a drooping over tops of trees made from sticks and soft grasses. Red Ovenbirds live in a dome made of mud and clay. Baya Weavers live in a bag-like home made out of long strands of leaves and grass that hangs from a tree. Bowerbirds live in a grass hut made from rocks, moss, nuts, and shells. Sociable Weaverbirds, Red Ovenbirds, and Baya Weavers' homes are for protection from predators, while Bowerbirds' home's purpose is to attract a mate.*

Conflict of Interest

None.

NOTE

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