

Syntax: Somewhere between Words and Text

by Nancy Chapel Eberhardt

The 2007 meta-analysis *Writing Next* (Graham & Perin, 2007) raised awareness and alarm about students' writing proficiency. Three years later, *Writing to Read* (Graham & Hebert, 2010), another meta-analysis, stressed the reciprocity between learning to write and understanding what we read. Now, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010), a nationwide initiative to ensure that all students are college and career ready by the end of high school, provide a foundation for K–12 instruction and assessment, have operationalized this relationship through their emphases on reading and writing in English/Language Arts and in the content areas. Furthermore, the CCSS have incorporated another important variable in Standard 10 (CCSS, English Language Art Standards, 2010; <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy>), which emphasizes that students read text at increasing levels of complexity from kindergarten through twelfth grade. These reports and new standards demand that educators examine the factors that make text challenging and address the role that writing plays in helping students comprehend complex text.

What factors have an impact on reading comprehension? Several factors focus on the reader's skill at the word level: accurate and automatic (rapid) word recognition, as well as semantic and morphologic knowledge. Since the National Reading Panel Report (2000), these aspects of reading have been emphasized instructionally, along with developing the reader's background knowledge. Curiously, however, these factors omit one of the variables upon which most readability formulae are based—sentence length and structure. Sentences are one of the structural properties used to predict text difficulty (Shanahan, 2013). This omission is significant, particularly in light of the CCSS's emphasis on complex text and the use of readability formulae to calibrate text complexity (formulae such as Lexile, Degrees of Reading Power, and others. See CCSS, ELA Appendix A, pp. 7–8).

The Omission of Grammar and Syntax Instruction

Surprisingly, of the 11 elements of effective adolescent writing instruction cited in *Writing Next* only one—sentence combining—mentions the sentence. Unfortunately, this report is often referenced for its statement about the futility of teaching grammar. This stance on grammar reinforces the beliefs held by all too many educators, whose unhappy memories of grammar instruction are centered on mindless exercises identifying nouns and verbs by neatly underlining and coding them with “N” or “V.” When taught this way, grammar instruction does little to improve writing, much less comprehension. Who wouldn't agree with this anti-grammar stance when such minimally useful tasks do little either to improve writing or to increase comprehension? However, that does not mean that knowledge of grammar is inherently useless. Rather, it signifies the pointlessness of ineffective strategies for teaching it.

Additional ambivalence about grammar instruction arises out of fear that stress on the mechanics of writing will stifle creativity. Perhaps this explains the preference for embedded grammar instruction in the milieu of Writer's Workshop (Calkins, 1994) in which the mechanics of writing are addressed within the context of writing. This brings to mind a personal experience. While I was studying piano as a teen, I heard a similar caution levied about learning music theory—too much theory will spoil creativity. Paradoxically, I found the opposite to be true. Knowledge of the theory gave me new insight about and appreciation for the music that I needed to learn. In other words, learning the underlying structure *improved* creative expression and understanding rather than squelching it. And, so it is too with grammar and syntax instruction for students: their reading becomes more conscious and appreciative, writing more creative.

Indeed, if we look more closely at the concern expressed in *Writing Next*, the important point captured in the criticism of grammar instruction is centered on the limited value of *traditional grammar* instruction. A closer look reveals a favorable opinion about the benefits of grammar instruction *that focuses on function*: that is, grammar instruction that emphasizes the role of words and their arrangement to convey meaning (*Writing Next*, p. 21, “A Note About Grammar Instruction”). It is this shift in focus that has implications for educators. It is not *if*—but *how*—we dedicate increased attention to grammar and syntax that is important. To this end, the focus of this article is on instructional practices to teach grammar and syntax with a focus on function in a way that will increase understanding of complex text.

The Sentence Comes First

Before students can make meaning from complex text, they must be able to decipher complex sentences. As Scott (2009) points out, “If a reader cannot derive meaning from individual sentences that make up a text, that is going to be a major obstacle in text-level comprehension.” The sentence is the unit of language strategically positioned between individual words and text. The sentence provides the linguistic environment in which we make decisions about word meaning (e.g., distinguishing between the multiple meaning for words like *duck*), use of punctuation (e.g., *trees* versus *tree's* versus *trees'*), and the impact of morphological elements (e.g., nominalization of a verb through suffixation, such as *revolution* from *revolt*). The sentence is also the language structure in which we can see how the order or arrangement of words has an impact on meaning. For example, the arrangement of words in sentences lets us determine who is doing what to whom (e.g., *The cat chased the dog* versus *The dog chased the cat*). Simply put, context is required to understand the meaning, form, roles, and relationships of words. Minimally, context is found within a sentence.

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Thus, instructional attention to sentence-level construction is essential as a step toward understanding complex text.

Multiple Meanings, Multiple Functions

Vocabulary words need context to help the listener or reader determine word meanings. No category of words illustrates the importance of context to determine the targeted meaning and function more clearly than words with multiple meanings.

Let's look at two of the meanings for the word *duck*. When functioning as a noun, it represents a web-footed, swimming bird; as a verb, it means to avoid. Wolf, Gottwald, and Orkin (2009) note that the more children know about a word—its multiple meanings and syntactic contexts—the more rapidly the word is processed during reading. Consider the impact (and importance) of knowing these two meanings and functions of **duck** when reading the following sentences:

The **ducks** paddled effortlessly across the pond.
She **ducked** into the shop to get out of the rain.

With this knowledge, the reader is less likely to envision a quacking bird going into a shop to avoid getting wet, but rather can picture a person taking action to escape the rain.

With awareness of words with multiple meanings and functions, readers can move into more sophisticated text-level reading with greater fluency and thus devote more energy to understanding. "In short, the semantic system not only affects the speed of accessing the word, but also impacts deeper comprehension of text" (Wolf, Gottwald, & Orkin, 2009, p. 22).

Clarifying the Meaning of Punctuation and Spelling

Writer Lynne Truss (2003) helped us appreciate the importance of punctuation on meaning in her bestselling book *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*. As illustrated in the title of her book, one comma can change a gentle panda that eats shoots and leaves into one that wields a gun. Syntactic awareness helps readers understand the role of punctuation and the morphological aspects of spelling. Scott (2004) explains that, after an initial phase when children's spelling is characterized by using letters

TABLE 1. Effective Instructional Practices Applied to Grammar and Syntax

	Phonemic Awareness and Phonics	Grammar and Syntax
Concrete, Visual	Letter tiles, letter cards	Movable sentence parts Sentence diagrams
Fluency	Timed reading of words based on designated sound, spelling, or syllable patterns	Reading with inflection based on meaningful phrasing and attention to punctuation
Meta-cognitive Awareness	Routines to guide spelling rules (e.g., 1-1-1 rule to double final consonant before adding a suffix beginning with a vowel)	Function-based questions (e.g., <i>Who did it?</i>) to guide identification of grammar elements in sentences Structured sentence practice with transition words (<i>and, but, so</i>) and signal words (<i>next, then, since, because</i>) Sentence combining tasks
Application (Transfer)	Morphology gives insight into meaning of content area vocabulary	Morphology gives insight into meaning of content area vocabulary used in the context of sentences Phrasing practice: Base sentence expansion tasks can improve phrasing when reading and interpreting text Comprehension questions that are answered, in part, by exploring sentence meaning to unpack text
Cumulative Content	Sound-spelling correspondences for vowel sound—progress from short vowels to long vowels to lower-frequency sounds Syllable types parallel the progression of vowel sound representations (in different spellings)	Subject of a sentence is precursor to tracing the subject through a paragraph or essay Knowledge of the functions of pronouns contributes to identifying the referential chain in complex text

to represent sounds, syntax plays a role in acquiring spelling distinctions such as oak *trees* versus a *tree's* branches. It is the grammatical knowledge of the function of *trees* in each phrase—plural in one, possessive in the other—that determines the correct use of punctuation and inflectional endings. Scott notes that knowledge of syntax can help readers and writers attend to morphological markers (e.g., *-ed* on verbs signaling past tense) to improve comprehension and expression. The challenge to educators is how to translate the importance of syntax into effective instruction.

Effective Instructional Practices

How might we teach grammar and syntax effectively? Researchers have identified effective practices to teach literacy concepts and skills, including

- 1. explicit instruction,
- 2. emphasis on making abstract concepts concrete,
- 3. emphasis on fluency,
- 4. development of meta-cognitive strategies to facilitate transfer of knowledge and skills, and
- 5. stress on cumulative and sequential presentation of content and skills.

To a large extent, research has documented the effectiveness of these practices as they relate to decoding instruction. Can these effective instructional practices that work with decoding also work to teach syntax? Table 1 illustrates examples of these practices with phonemic awareness and phonics, areas with which literacy educators have had extensive experience, and then offers an extrapolation to instruction in grammar and syntax.

A Function-Based Instructional Approach

Understanding the basic structure of a sentence is the foundation for understanding grammar and syntax. In the same way that the finite set of vowel sounds or syllable types allows us to create an infinite number of words, the basic elements of a sentence—subject and predicate—allow us to compose an unlimited number of sentences. This process is fueled by a never-ending interplay between content (from what we think about, experience, and read) and the art of composing sentences. Initially, identifying the parts of a sentence should focus on the functions of sentence parts (i.e., the word's role or job). Once students understand these functions, accurate labeling of the grammatical components becomes easier.

Sentence Expansion—Making the Abstract Concrete

Despite the foundational nature of the base sentence, recognizing and writing complete and more elaborated sentences can be elusive for many students. Instructors can make the process of writing a sentence more concrete by using manipulative sentence strips. Paper strips are paired with meta-cognitive guiding questions, which cue the writer to the type of information that builds the sentence (e.g., the question words *who* or *what* identify a person, place, thing, or idea; *where* elicits a word or phrases indicating location). This

practice can increase how well students develop the critical concept of sentence formation (Greene, 2010).

Consider the following example based on a science reading selection (Rodgers & Streluk, 2007). The process begins by answering the questions that will generate the base sentence.

Who (what) did it? vapor	What did they (he/she/it) do? condenses
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Additional manipulative pieces and questions serve to expand the base sentence. The following questions help students to elaborate on the predicate. (It is important to note that not every expansion question need be answered for each sentence, hence, the blank boxes.)

Where? in the atmosphere	When?	How? at cooler temperatures
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After expanding the predicate, questions guide expansion of the subject:

How many?	Which one? from evaporation	What kind? water
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Using the manipulative pieces, students can arrange the words and phrases to compose sentences, and can vary the syntax (i.e., the word sequence) for clarity and interest. It is possible to arrange the sentence parts in multiple ways. Once arranged, students can compare the meaning of these various configurations: Are they communicating the same meaning or something different?

Water vapor from evaporation condenses at cooler temperatures in the atmosphere.
At cooler temperatures, water vapor from evaporation condenses in the atmosphere.

Through manipulation of sentence parts, students learn to recognize the changes in meaning that can occur when we vary the order of words and phrases. Students become more proficient at producing sentences of increased complexity. As they do so, they enhance their capacity to process complex sentences when listening and reading.

Unpacking Sentence Content for Understanding and Phrasing

Sentence expansion questions play the reciprocal role of improving reading comprehension. Gottwald (2013) expressed it well by equating micro-level sentence analysis to basic comprehension. For example, the same questions about the

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function of words in sentences can be used to unpack (i.e., break down text to understand it) a sentence to identify its subject (*What is doing it?*) and verb (*What does it do?*). Consider the following sentence:

At cooler temperatures, water vapor from evaporation condenses in the atmosphere.

What is doing it?	vapor
What does it do?	condenses
How does it condense?	at cooler temperatures
Where does it condense?	in the atmosphere
What kind of vapor ?	water
Which vapor ?	from evaporation

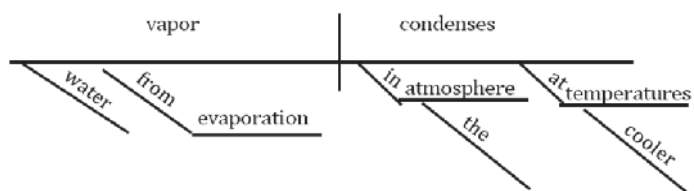
Analysis designed to extract meaning provides the added benefits of increasing students' interaction with the text (i.e., repeated readings) and helping them parse the language into meaningful units (phrases). They can thereby increase their use of phrasing when reading. In the following sentences, slashes denote phrases.

At cooler temperatures/, water vapor/ from evaporation/ condenses in the atmosphere/.

Practicing this skill during reading instruction helps students develop the automaticity that enables them to apply phrasing when reading complex text.

Sentence Diagramming

Another way to make the relationship of words and phrases concrete is through sentence diagramming. Sentence diagrams—perhaps the original graphic organizer—create what Kitty Florey (2008) calls a “picture of language.” Through an array of horizontal, vertical, and slanting lines, a sentence diagram conveys the relationships among the words in a sentence. The diagram visually distills the meaning of the sentence to its base subject and predicate, thereby fostering sentence comprehension (Hennessy, 2013). While we may think that sentence diagramming is reserved for students in honors English, this activity is beneficial for struggling readers by literally showing them how words in different parts of a sentence relate to each other; the slanted lines point to the words that expand or modify the main words in the sentence.



At a glance, the diagrammed sentence communicates those words and phrases related to the subject (*vapor*) and those that expand on the verb (*condenses*).

Clarify Ambiguity

Readers can utilize the same metacognitive questions about the function of words in sentences to clarify ambiguity. Visualize the action represented by this sentence:

The lady bumped the man with the umbrella.

Is the phrase *with the umbrella* describing **which man** (i.e., the man *with the umbrella*) or **how** the lady bumped the man (i.e., she bumped him *with the umbrella* rather than with something else)? To clarify meaning, the writer must revise, possibly by supplying additional text. For example: *The lady bumped the man **carrying** the umbrella.* This revision clarifies that the umbrella identifies which man was bumped. In contrast: *The lady bumped the man with **her** umbrella.* This revision identifies that the umbrella belongs to the woman and is what bumped into the man. Instruction that emphasizes the function of words and phrases provides both writers and readers with a mechanism to clarify meaning.

Explicit instruction in function-based questions (e.g., *Who did it? What did they do?*) can enhance both reading and writing. These questions are the common denominator for these strategies: expanding sentences when students are speaking or writing, unpacking the meaning of sentences when reading, recognizing meaningful phrases, diagramming sentences to show correct word relationships, and clarifying ambiguity. Together, these skills contribute to a better understanding of complex text.

A Reciprocal Process: Writing Based on Reading

The report *Writing to Read* recommends that students write about a text they are reading to enhance how well they comprehend it (Graham & Hebert, 2010). Let's see how we can merge this recommendation with the use of the same metacognitive sentence expansion questions to unpack meaning of text—a kind of reverse sentence expansion. Suppose students listen to or read the following paragraph from their history text:

The British wanted to isolate, or set apart, New England from the other colonies. If the British controlled New York, this could be done. General Howe planned a three-pronged attack in October 1777. A three-pronged attack is an attack in three separate places against an enemy. The plan was carefully laid out: General John Burgoyne would march from Canada. Colonel Barry St. Leger would attack from the west. General Howe would reinforce from the South. The British intended to destroy the American army once and for all. (King & Napp, 2005)

After students complete the passage, instructors can ask them to use information from the text to answer: Who did it? (*Howe*), What did he do? (*planned*), and What did he plan? (*an attack*). Answers to these questions provide a check of basic comprehension and at the same time generate a base sentence.

Howe planned an attack.

Once basic comprehension is established, the function-based questions that expand the subject and predicate can drive the development of a more complete and complex sentence. A simple chart can help cue the possible questions to expand the subject and predicate. Students fill in the chart based on the information from the reading selection. Note that not all questions can be answered based on the text; hence, some are blank.

Questions to expand the subject (adjectival)	Questions to expand the predicate (adverbial)
<i>Which one?</i>	<i>When?</i> October 1777
<i>What kind?</i> Three-pronged	<i>Where?</i>
<i>How many?</i>	<i>How?</i>
	<i>Why?</i> To isolate New England from other colonies and destroy the American army

This information can then be combined into a sentence.

In October 1777, Howe planned a three-pronged attack to isolate New England from other colonies and destroy the American army.

The sentence constructed through this exercise simultaneously requires students to utilize information from the text while organizing that information into a comprehensible and coherent statement. Through this kind of content-oriented application of grammar, students experience and practice the reciprocal cognitive processes common to reading and writing. When students gain knowledge of the reciprocity of these thought processes, it is powerful. Through repeated experiences such as this, students develop increased discipline and tolerance for the rigorous thinking that is required to understand complex text. Additionally, the parsing of sentences into meaningful phrases becomes more fluent and enhances comprehension.

Instruction to Increase Syntactic Complexity

Initially, sentence expansion activities help students make sentences longer by adding information. When writers subordinate information by using clauses, the level of sophistication to convey meaning increases. Compare *The big, black dog chased its favorite tennis ball* with *The dog that chased tennis balls is big and black*. The first version of the sentence adds information in a linear fashion; the second uses a clause to subordinate some of the information about the dog. How can instruction help students progress from linear sentence expansion to the development of even more complex sentences?

Hochman (2009) provides an approach for explicit syntax instruction, an approach strategically geared to help students increase syntactic complexity. Using the conjunctions *because*, *but*, and *so*, for example, Hochman systematically guides students to use these words to construct more complex sentences. The first step is to establish the meaning of each conjunction: *because* tells why, *but* indicates a change of direction, and *so* signals cause and effect. With this knowledge, students then

complete open-ended sentences according to the targeted meaning. For example: (text in italics provided as sample answers)

The teacher was happy
because...*it was the first day of a new school year.*
but...*realized the end of the year would come.*
so... *she allowed the class extra computer time.*

By completing sentence starters like these, first drawing upon students' personal experiences to contribute sentence content, students develop an understanding of the impact of these conjunctions on meaning. The same strategy can then be applied with content-based topics. For example,

The two chemicals failed to react but *provided students with an opportunity to investigate what happened.*
The two chemicals failed to react because *they had gotten wet.*
The two chemicals failed to react, so *the teacher repeated the experiment with dry chemicals.*

Another example illustrates how the completion of this type of sentence frame can serve as a comprehension check for the history text selection mentioned above.

Howe planned an attack but *it failed to accomplish its goals.*
Howe planned an attack because *the British wanted to isolate New England from other colonies and destroy the American army.*
Howe planned an attack so *that the British could gain control.*

While the function of the three words—*but*, *because*, *so*—is to join ideas (i.e., the role of conjunctions is to join), the impact on comprehension comes from the knowledge of the distinction in meaning among the words.

The use of sentence starters need not be limited to conjunctions. Sentence writing practice can draw upon a wide range of sentence starters, each designed to elevate the level of expression conveyed in the sentence.

These activities to develop sentence complexity illustrate the shift in emphasis from grammatical labels to text meaning. They demonstrate the importance of structuring sentence-level writing to incorporate a specific focus and illustrate how a grammatical strategy can be applied across content areas.

Sentence Combining—When, Why, How

Once students have a grasp of basic sentence formulation and structure, sentence-combining activities can provide multiple benefits. Research supports sentence combining as an instructional practice that facilitates growth in reading comprehension (Graham & Perin, 2007). Sentence combining activities show students how to combine simpler sentences into sentences with greater complexity by using subordination of information. This approach provides practice with the kind of syntactic manipulation that strengthens semantic and syntactic skills.

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The following example illustrates how to use a sentence combining activity based on content from a literature selection, *Eleven* by Sandra Cisneros (1991).

Rachel was usually an obedient child.
The red sweater was tattered.
The red sweater did not belong to Rachel.
Rachel refused to put the red sweater on.
While Rachel was usually an obedient child, she refused to put the tattered red sweater on because it did not belong to her.

Part of the value of sentence combining comes from comparing various combinations of the same sentences. Students can sense the slight changes in meaning and the effect those sentence changes may have on the overall meaning of the composition (Saddler, 2012). Consider the subtle difference in meaning in this recombination:

While Rachel was usually an obedient child, she refused to put on the tattered red sweater that did not belong to her.

The change from *because* in the first sentence to *that* in the second altered the meaning from causation to descriptive.

Although there are a number of benefits to sentence combining as it pertains to improving writing, one benefit that is specifically relevant to reading comprehension has to do with increasing familiarity with various syntactic patterns (Saddler, 2012). Saddler speculates that such familiarity may “make the decoding of similar sentences more fluent when these are encountered in a reading selection. Furthermore, comprehension may be improved if the sentence combining exercises are created from content the students are currently studying” (Saddler, 2012, p.18). Similar to the value of using sentence starters to practice working with particular structures, carefully designed content-specific sentence combining activities can enhance the comprehension skills required to negotiate complex text.

“I Don’t Understand This”

Some years ago, I was working with a fifth grader who was reading a science text. After grappling with the first few paragraphs, he stopped reading, looked up, and said, “I don’t understand this because I don’t already know this.” Among the many insights conveyed by this student’s statement is the distinction between *learning to read* versus *reading to learn*. This distinction is at the heart of comprehension of informational text. It is also at the heart of what we need to teach students to do when they encounter a topic that is new to them in what they are reading, namely, how to guide students to understand something they do not already know.

If we consider the questions we used at the sentence level (e.g., *Who did it? What did it do?* and so on), we see that they are the same questions that we need to ask at the text level. For example, if we think about what the subject of an expository passage is, we discover that we are asking for the *person, place, thing, or idea* that the entire passage is about.

The process utilized in the Language Circles’ *Report Form Process* (Greene, 2012) illustrates how this works. In this process, readers learn to look for repeated words and phrases across the entire passage, as well as for synonymous words or ideas that substitute for the word that was not literally repeated. Schleppegrell (in her article, “Exploring Language and Meaning in Complex Text,” in this issue of *Perspectives*) calls these *referential chains*. Such a word or phrase is often the subject (topic) of the entire selection. Greene goes further: to make this abstract concept concrete, instructors use an analogy in which they compare the subject of a reading selection to a thread that can be pulled through a piece of fabric.

Starfish are not real fish at all. **They** are animals that live in the sea. A **starfish** looks like a star. Most of **them** have five arms. At the tip of each arm is an eye. The **starfish** has as many eyes as **it** has arms!

In many ways, **this animal** is different. If an arm is lost, **it** can grow a new one. If a **starfish** is cut in two, each piece will grow into a whole new **starfish**.

(Example from Language Circle Enterprise, 2012, pp. 1–15)

This process elevates the use of a grammatical concept beyond a single-sentence construction and assists students with the kind of close reading advocated in the CCSS. The process requires that the reader maintains the focus of the topic across multiple sentences in which the subject is repeated directly (*starfish*) and referred to with synonyms (*this animal*) or pronouns (*they, it, them*). The ability to identify the subject of a sentence is a stepping stone toward the ability to trace the subject (i.e., pull the thread of meaning) through a paragraph or longer reading selection.

CCSS and Grammar

The CCSS includes grammar standards among the grade-specific language standards. However, unlike reading, there are no clearly determined foundation level skills. (See “The Role of Complex Sentence Knowledge in Children with Reading and Writing Difficulties” by Scott and Balthazar and “Syntax Development in the School-Age Years: Implications for Assessment and Intervention” by Nelson in this issue of *Perspectives* for an attempt to identify foundational grammatical and syntactic skills). In the absence of a clear delineation of foundation level skills in grammar for teachers to follow, it is essential for instructors to recognize the importance of this content and these skills and to use their own knowledge of best practices to teach these aspects of literacy development. There are some standards that specify grammar and usage knowledge and skills, but, once again, it falls to the instructors to design curriculum and instruction that will produce the desired outcomes. Explicit focus on syntactically dependent skills using practices such as determining the multiple meanings of words, unpacking embedded sentences using grammar-oriented meta-cognitive questions, and considering the function of words to interpret morphological markers or punctuation correctly can facilitate readers’ deeper understanding of text. The common

denominator of all of these instructional practices is the requirement that students deliberate over the meaning of words in combinations and in relationship to each other.

A Call to Action for Syntax Instruction

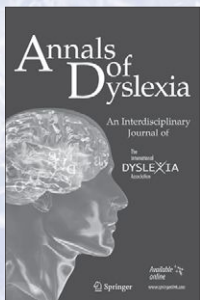
The CCSS, with their emphasis on the range, quality, and complexity of student reading material K–12, underscore the importance of reading with understanding. If the goal for educators is to have students understand complex text, then we must ensure that they can negotiate the meaning of sentence-level structures. It seems clear that the question is not *should* we teach grammar and syntax, but rather *how* we teach them. Clearly research that studies the effectiveness of the types of practices discussed in this article warrant more attention. We must increase our focus on sentence-level instruction—somewhere between words and text—and build meaning by stressing the way words work together.

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