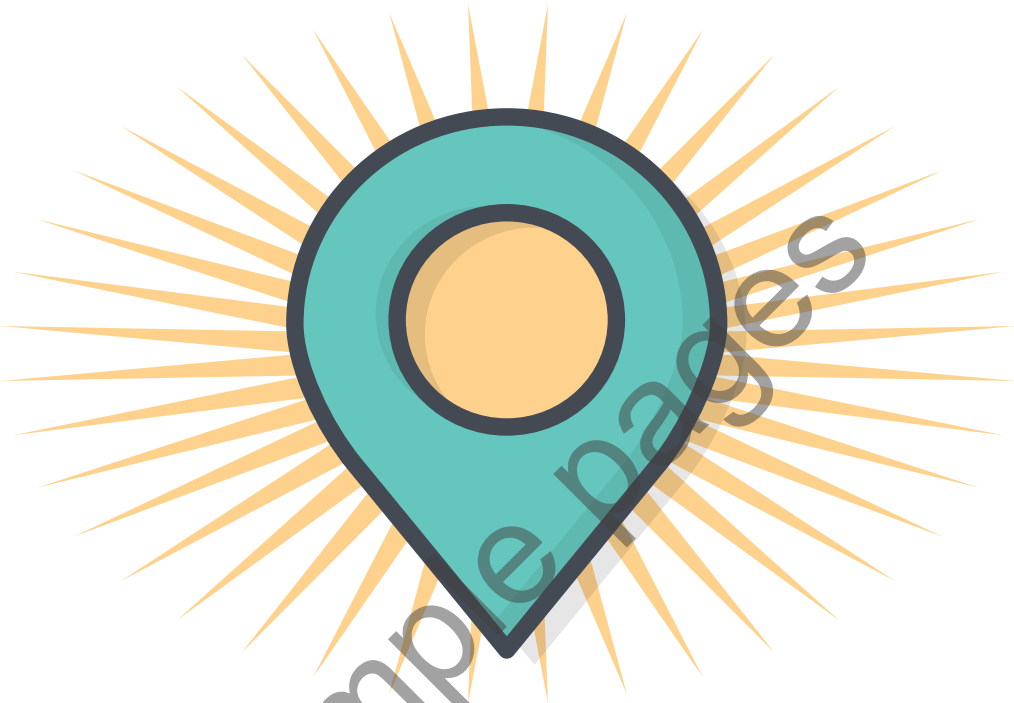
JENNIFER SERRAVALLO

New York Times best-selling author of *The Reading Strategies Book*



Understanding Texts & Readers

Responsive Comprehension Instruction with Leveled Texts

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Heinemann
361 Hanover Street
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A Note About Text Levels Assigned to Children's Books

This book includes discussion of a variety of quantitative and qualitative text leveling systems (i.e., DRA, F&P Text Level Gradient™, Reading Recovery, Lexile, and more). For the purposes of consistency, all children's books I write about in *Understanding Texts & Readers* were checked through www.fountasandpinnellleveledbooks.com. Their leveling system is used by others across other leveling sites and apps, but the website is the only official source. Some books mentioned in *Understanding Texts & Readers* did not appear in the database at all, and in those cases I approximated the levels based on the text characteristics identified by Fountas and Pinnell in their many publications, including *The Literacy Continuum*. If you use another leveling source, or rely on a different leveling system without an official source, you may find discrepancies across different sites and apps.

As you read the book, you'll learn that leveling is not a perfect science. The level assigned to a specific book can sometimes change based on new thinking by experts. It's crucial to build your knowledge about texts and become comfortable forming your own judgments about the books you offer your readers. I hope *Understanding Texts & Readers* helps you do just that.

The author and publisher wish to thank those who have generously given permission to reprint borrowed material:

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Credits continue on page x.

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How *Understanding Texts & Readers* Can Help

My preferred framework for reading instruction is balanced literacy, with a strong reading workshop at its core. In classrooms like these, teachers offer opportunities for students to practice reading independently every day; some time for kids to work collaboratively and in conversation with partnerships and book clubs; instruction around skills identified in standards through whole-class minilessons, shared reading lessons, and interactive read-alouds; small-group and one-on-one lessons with students based on individual goals; and instruction using a strong word study/phonics program. You'll read about this approach throughout this book.

That said, if you or the school you work in uses a different approach to reading instruction, you will find that this book offers you support for learning about children's books and the students under your care with more depth and precision. This knowledge will help you as you assess and teach readers to support their comprehension.

In the two tables that follow, I discuss how this book can help you with various reading instruction challenges regardless of your approach to literacy instruction.

CHALLENGE	HOW *UNDERSTANDING TEXTS & READERS* CAN HELP YOU
Leveled texts are misunderstood.	This book helps position levels where they belong: as a teacher's tool, not as a label for kids. This book will show you *how* to use them as a tool to help with assessment, identifying goals for readers, and figuring out which strategies to teach.
It can be hard to confer with readers when you haven't read the book the student is reading.	This book shows you how to use text characteristics and expectations for reader response to inform your instruction.
If you use guided reading, for it to be most effective, it needs to be about teaching the *reader,* not just the *book*.	By focusing on characteristics of texts, you'll learn what to focus on during guided reading lessons, what strategies will work best for that level of text, and what to expect of reader response.
Comprehension can feel nebulous. It's one thing to identify that kids aren't "getting it" but harder for you to put your finger on what skills, exactly, you should teach.	This book relies on the same goals as *The Reading Strategies Book* which so many have found help to clarify what to focus on and where to start. Student work samples with annotated callouts clearly and quickly show you what "getting it" looks like, even if you don't know the book the student is reading.
Other guides to text complexity are filled with hard-to-understand terminology, and can make it all feel just . . . complex.	Text characteristics are described in short, easy-to-understand paragraphs with rich examples from children's literature. This way, you can quickly get a handle on what to expect of the books students are reading.

LITERACY FRAMEWORK	HOW *UNDERSTANDING TEXTS & READERS* CAN HELP YOU
Guided Reading	Guided reading is most effective when instruction focuses on what readers need and when you provide help for students as they navigate texts at their instructional level. This book will help you better understand how to identify comprehension skills that students need and how to make strategies transferrable.
Basal Reader/Anthology	Most reading textbooks include reading passages from a wide range of text levels although the book is purported to be for a single grade level. In addition, it's not always the case that texts increase in complexity as the year progresses. In this book, you can learn about text complexity and use that to better understand the level, and therefore the characteristics, of the texts that the students are reading. This will help you anticipate the kinds of challenges that will need to be scaffolded for readers and the strategies to teach.
Reading Workshop *or* Independent Reading *or* Daily 5™/CAFE	The heart of the reading workshop is independent reading with conferring and small-group instruction. This teaching is most powerful when it is responsive and goal-focused. This book will help you to find the right comprehension goals for readers, by using one of the various comprehension assessments described in the book and/or by using the skill progressions to identify student strengths and needs in the books they are reading. When students are reading books that you haven't read, especially at higher elementary and middle school levels, you can feel uncertain that you are choosing the right things to teach. The skill progressions and sample student work, with generalizable "look-fors," offered in this book will help you feel more sure-footed in conversations with readers, even when you haven't read the book they are reading.

Contents

Acknowledgments

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A fraction of this book's raw material was culled from two previous publications—*Independent Reading Assessment: Fiction* and *Independent Reading Assessment: Nonfiction*—where I first described my thinking around comprehension skill progressions and text complexity. Deep thanks to the Scholastic editorial team who worked with me on that project from 2011 to 2013: Sarah Longhi, Wendy Murray, and Lynne Wilson.

This work would not be in your hands today were it not for the vision and tenacity of Vicki Boyd at Heinemann. Double rainbows to you, my friend. The great care my wonderful editor Zoë White showed to the manuscript in its final months before publication fulfilled my hopes and dreams. This book wouldn't be half as good without her critical edits and suggestions. Thanks also to the rest of the Heinemann team for the breathtaking design, amazing editorial coordination, and whip-smart marketing: Suzanne Heiser; Victoria Merecki; Catrina Marshall; Eric Chalek, Elizabeth Silvis, and team; Sherry Day, Michael Grover, and Dennis Doyle; and Brett Whitmarsh and team.

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Finally, and perhaps most importantly, thanks to my family.

Credits continued from page ii

Image Credit

Readers, Texts, and Levels—and What It All Means for Comprehension

I met Vanessa in her fourth-grade classroom. Press-on nails. Rainbow-striped hoodie. Glasses. A glowing smile. The first time I talked with her about a book, she was halfway through *Rules* by Cynthia Lord. I wasn't her teacher; I was a visiting staff developer, fortunate to work with the dedicated teachers in her South Bronx school. The focus of our professional learning was to improve our understanding of the readers in the class and, from there, offer them targeted, specific goals and strategies to support their comprehension growth. Vanessa came up during our prelab site meeting as a student who puzzled her teacher, a student she wanted me to work with in the classroom as an audience of teachers observed.

Vanessa's background was challenging: this wasn't her first time in fourth grade. In fact, she'd been retained for two years in a row for not being able to pass the state test (the New York State ELA exam). That's heartbreaking enough, but what concerned her teacher even more was that she wasn't quite sure what she should be doing to help Vanessa grow as a reader. Her teacher had administered their school-sanctioned running records, and according to that assessment, Vanessa could read texts at Level R with fluency, accuracy, and comprehension.

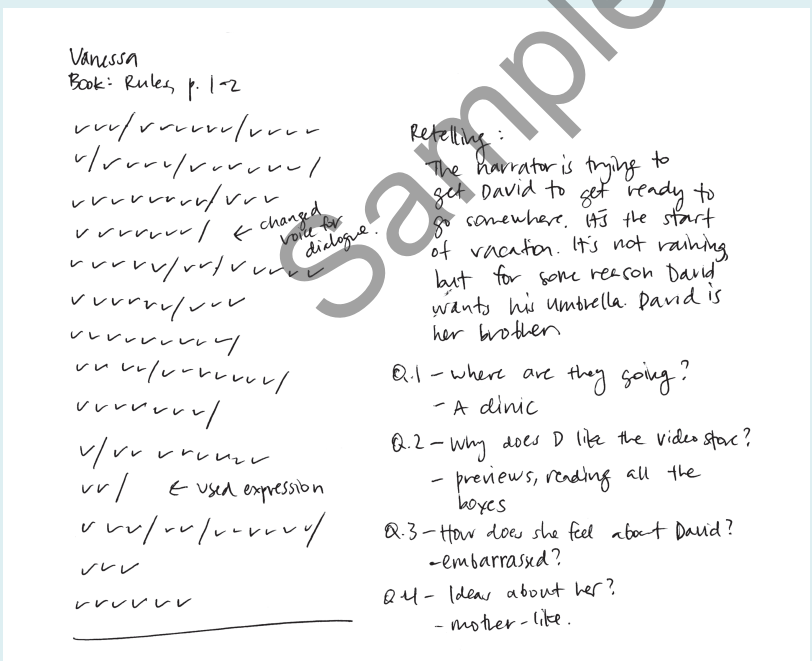
For the running record, Vanessa read a 200-word excerpt from a novel and did well: 100 percent accuracy, strong fluency, correct responses to the comprehension questions. Level R texts, incidentally, are typically what fourth graders read between November and March. So, according to that measure, she was "on grade level." The

running record, intended to be a formative assessment, offered her teacher little direction because Vanessa did so well. Yet, her teacher reasoned, she must need *some* support because she was not passing her state tests: tests that were written on a fourth-grade level, tests that asked her to demonstrate comprehension.

What is going on? we all wondered.

Around the same time I met Vanessa, I was involved in a professional learning group at the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project. We were studying how to track student comprehension across whole, continuous chapter books. With these collegial conversations fresh in my mind, I wondered if the short-passage assessment Vanessa's teacher had used wasn't giving us all the information we needed to match Vanessa to texts and to appropriate goals. To test my theory, I created whole-book assessments for Vanessa and her peers.

I decided these whole-book assessments would be most helpful beginning with books at Level J, because that was the level at which students were



Vanessa's teacher used a running record to learn how Vanessa reads 200 words aloud. As she read, her teacher took notes on her accuracy and fluency. After reading, Vanessa retold the text and answered four questions—two literal and two inferential.

being asked to read excerpts, rather than whole books, during their running record assessments. With the books getting longer beginning at Level J, I was curious how the length impacted student comprehension. I read a few books at the level, selected two that I thought represented the sorts of challenges readers are likely to encounter at that level, then repeated the process at Levels K, L, M, N . . . all the way up to W. I stopped at W (well into the sixth-grade benchmark) because I feel that children who are reading at Level W with depth can often work with more challenging levels flexibly. I wove about a dozen open-ended prompts into two books at each level and planned to offer the student a choice of texts. The prompts were designed to help me understand how the reader made sense of plot, setting, characters, vocabulary, figurative language, themes, and ideas.

I asked Vanessa to select between the two book choices at Level R because that was the level she had been reading. She did. I told her that as she read the book independently, she would come upon ten-or-so sticky notes with prompts, and that when she did, she should stop and jot a response. It took her a couple of days to finish the book and turn in her responses. I promptly read them with the teacher team at the school. Unfortunately, we discovered, none of Vanessa's responses were correct.

How was it, we started to wonder, *that a student could appear to comprehend a certain level of text when presented with a 200-word excerpt, and yet, when she tried to read an entire book at that same level, she struggled with comprehension?*

We repeated this procedure (gave her a choice of two texts, asked her to read the book independently and respond to the prompts) with texts at Level Q. Then P. Then O. Then N. Vanessa read the whole book independently, answered questions, and responded to prompts. We looked at her responses and found she was barely getting the gist. It wasn't until we saw her responses to a text at Level M, *Stuart Goes to School* by Sara Pennypacker, that we found what we thought was a level of text that she could read with comprehension during independent reading. For this book, she answered two-thirds of the questions in a way that demonstrated comprehension. A few questions were still tricky for her—questions that asked her to retell important events, put things in sequence, and connect causes and effects. All of the questions that challenged her were related to Plot and Setting, so that became her goal. Going forward, she'd practice strategies for helping her with retelling, sequencing, and synthesizing as she read many books at or around Level M. (More on this later, but for now it is important to note that we didn't limit Vanessa's choice to just one level.)

Just to recap: Vanessa was a fourth-grade student reading at a second-grade level whose age would have put her in a sixth-grade class.

We started to wonder about the discrepancy between the level on which Vanessa demonstrated comprehension on a running record and the level she showed understanding in a whole text. Was this wide gap—the difference between M and R—a fluke? Or were many kids attempting to read books that they weren't actually comprehending?

I asked all the children in the class to select one of the books with prompts on sticky notes to read, asking them to select between those books that were at or around the level at which they'd demonstrated independence on the running record. After looking at their responses and repeating the assessment at lower levels as necessary, I found that, on average, students could read the short running records with accuracy, fluency, and comprehension at about two reading levels more complex than what they showed they could comprehend with this assessment. Why this discrepancy between comprehension on short texts or excerpts, and long texts? One possible explanation is that when students read chapter books, they need to track the plot over dozens of pages (possibly over days), infer about characters and notice how they change over many pages, and interpret a theme from a whole book. This thinking that readers do across many pages and days can be assessed only when students are reading whole books, and the current short-text assessments used widely in today's classrooms offer a limited view of what readers are able to do.

I was curious to see if what we found with Vanessa and her classmates would be true in other schools, so I sent chapter books with embedded questions and prompts to dozens of schools across the country. Hundreds and hundreds of student responses were mailed back to me, and I pored over them one summer with a volunteer group of educators from the tri-state area. Our findings were consistent with what we had seen in most of that South Bronx fourth-grade class: when looking at whole-book comprehension, students typically demonstrated strong comprehension in books about two levels lower than a short-passage running record indicated. There were some exceptions (about a quarter of students) where the short-text and whole-text assessments matched. And there were some exceptions where, like Vanessa, the text levels between long- and short-text reading were multiple levels apart.

Am I saying that running records are invalid? No, not at all. Vanessa could read that 200-word excerpt of a Level R text with comprehension, accuracy, and fluency. The assessment didn't lie, and her teacher didn't administer it incorrectly. But when she read a whole text, the longer text pushed her beyond her current skill level when it came to memory, sequencing, and synthesizing and suddenly interfered with her ability to completely comprehend. The running record was evaluating a different reading task than the one required by a whole book.

After learning so much about Vanessa, her teacher and I decided that we'd help her select books that were shorter and less complex than what

"If we teach a child the skill of reading without encouraging the love of reading, we will have created a literate illiterate."

—KYLENE BEERS (2017)

she'd been reading. We offered her strategies over time in conferences and small groups that helped support her with the goal of Plot and Setting: strategies focused on supporting her ability to remember, sequence, retell, and synthesize important events. After she'd read several books at and around Level M, we supported her practice in texts at and around Level N, then at and around Level O, then at and around Level P, and so on throughout the year, always checking back in on her comprehension and how she was making sense of plot, setting, character, vocabulary, and themes. With practice, she got comfortable with retelling and summarizing, and as she moved into more challenging texts she started working on strategies for new goals that matched what she needed at the time.

This story has a happy ending: Vanessa passed her fourth-grade test that year with flying colors. More importantly, though, she became a reader. She was engaged, excited about books, and chose to read outside of "reading time" in school. She pulled me aside later in the year and said, "Ms. Jen! I get it now! When you say 'make a movie in your mind,' you mean that you can actually see it in your mind like a movie! I see it now!"

Vanessa's story can teach us a number of important lessons about reading instruction, each of which will be explored in this book.

- Comprehension is not fixed; it's fluid, based on a number of factors.
- The level of text that a student can read depends on multiple variables.
- Text leveling isn't a perfect science.
- Matching books and readers is not as simple as it may seem.
- One single assessment often doesn't give us the entire picture.
- Responsive instruction is crucial to the development of readers.

A Note About This Book

Comprehension and leveled texts are topics that are heavily researched and can become deep and complex. What I aim to do in this book is to honor the extensive research on these topics but make the understandings about texts and readers that I believe to be essential for reading teachers more accessible and doable. Let's all learn from Vanessa's story and approach our readers with a deeper knowledge about them and the texts they read to match them with books they can read with independence and engagement, goals they can work toward that are meaningful and matched to their needs, and strategies that will help them work on those goals so they become strong, confident, engaged lifelong readers.

Comprehension Goals and Considerations

Reading is a complex process. Teaching children to read is challenging in part because comprehension is largely invisible. Although miscue analysis provides a window into the student's processing and use of strategies as they read (Goodman, Watson, and Burke, 1987; Clay 2000; Wilde 2000), and although we can tap into student thinking through the use of questions and prompts, we can't be completely sure about what is happening inside the mind of a reader. In addition, different scholars and researchers offer a range of perspectives on what it means to "comprehend" a text, which can cause confusion about where to begin, what to focus on, and how to best support learners.

Rosenblatt (1978), for example, argues that a text's meaning is created as a reader transacts with the text. In this way, the reader is a "co-author" of the text, constructing meaning alongside the author's words. The same text, with different readers, would yield different meanings. For example, I recently read DiCamillo's incredible *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* to my seven-year-old. I cried through the last two chapters as I read to her, and she looked at me

Understanding as you're reading helps you to engage with the text, read accurately, read with fluency, understand what the author is saying, and think beyond the text. In essence, comprehension is everything.

wondering why I was so sad. Edward was reunited with Abeline. That's a happy ending! She didn't comprehend it less than I did; we simply had different interpretations.

At the other end of the debate, Coleman and Pimental (2012) have argued for teaching children to read "within the four corners of the text," closely examining the work in a way that leaves the reader out of the text and instead asks the child to engage with text-dependent analysis.

With such differing advice, what's a teacher to do?

Research That Informs My Thinking

The roots of my thinking about reading comprehension were most shaped by the comprehension research published in journals in the 1980s and popularized in professional books during the 1990s and early 2000s. Often referred to as the "proficient reader research" and informed by cognitive psychology, it focused on what proficient readers do to make meaning from a text. Important works include Gordon and Pearson (1983), Hansen (1981), Duffy et al. (1987), Paris, Cross, and Lipson (1984), and Afflerbach and Johnston (1986), to name a few, along with those by researchers at the Center for Study of Reading (CSR) at the University of Illinois. They outline the characteristics of skilled readers and define reading as a constructive process. At CSR, under the leadership of learning theorist and cognitive psychologist Richard C. Andersen, literacy specialists, cognitive psychologists, learning theorists, linguists, and other scholars produced research over two decades that provided educators with instructional frameworks that are used in elementary classrooms today to support the teaching of reading (Hammond and Nessel 2011).

Comprehension Goals, Skills, and Strategies

One of the characteristics of skilled readers most central to my thinking in this book is that skilled readers are strategic. This speaks to the metacognitive aspect of the comprehension process—that is, skilled readers think about their thinking and apply their skills as they read to reach deeper levels of comprehension (Afflerbach, Pearson, and Paris 2008). Translated by practitioners into classroom practice and popularized by books such as *Mosaic of Thought* (Keene and Zimmermann 1997), *Reading with Meaning: Teaching Comprehension in the Primary Grades* (D. Miller 2002), and *Strategies That Work* (Harvey and Goudvis 2000), this idea of strategic reading in turn led to the identification of a handful of thinking skills that all proficient readers use.

These seven areas (or "keys") to comprehension provided educators with a needed frame for their reading instruction (Zimmermann and Hutchins 2003). For me, the beauty of framing instruction around these

areas is that they apply to both narrative and informational texts. It is really about the mind work that readers do as they approach a text; the application changes slightly because the text structure and composition change. In the table below you can see some of the ways in which these seven areas can be applied to reading fiction and nonfiction texts. This list is not exhaustive but rather offers examples to help define them in light of different text types.

READING COMPREHENSION SKILL	EXAMPLES OF HOW THIS SKILL IS USED WHEN READING FICTION TEXTS	EXAMPLES OF HOW THIS SKILL IS USED WHEN READING NONFICTION TEXTS
Determining Importance	• Determining the most important events in a plot • Determining theme(s)	• Determining main idea(s) of a section or whole text • Determining important facts or details that support a main idea
Inferring/Interpreting	• Developing ideas, thoughts, and insights about characters • Interpreting the meaning of a symbol • Determining the meaning of an unfamiliar word using context	• Figuring out an author's purpose or main idea when it is not explicitly mentioned • Determining the meaning of an unfamiliar word using context
Synthesizing/Retelling	• Putting together causes and effects or problems and solutions • Retelling the most important plot events in order	• Putting together all the details within a section to determine a main idea
Questioning	• Asking questions about character motivation • Questioning author's craft (e.g., why the author used a certain symbol, chose a particular setting, or made a particular plot decision)	• Approaching a text with curiosity—asking questions about the content and reading on to discover answers • Questioning the author's authority to write about the topic, and the author's possible bias
Visualizing	• Creating multisensory images about setting • Picturing the character's physical traits as well as emotions based on body language or facial expressions	• Developing a moving picture ("movie in the mind") based on the photographs or visuals provided and the descriptions an author gives about the topic in question
Activating Prior Knowledge	• Activating relevant prior knowledge about a time period, a type of person, or a place • Activating knowledge about the author, series, or genre	• Activating relevant prior knowledge about a topic; comparing what the reader knows (or thinks they know) with what the author teaches
Utilizing Fix-Up Strategies	• Monitoring for understanding and using a strategy to determine the meaning of an unfamiliar word	• Monitoring for understanding and using a strategy to determine the meaning of an unfamiliar word

A Hierarchy of Reading Goals

Understanding as you're reading helps you to engage with the text, read the words accurately, read with fluency, understand what the author is saying, and think beyond the text. In essence, comprehension is everything.

But saying "comprehension is everything" can make the job of teaching reading feel nebulous. With a child who needs support, where do I start? In an effort to organize myself, and to support teachers who are working with student readers, I created a hierarchy of reading goals (page 11). My intention is not to say one goal is more or less important than another; they are all equally important and part of a whole. The reason for organizing reading into goals is to help teachers know where to start when a child would benefit from support in more than one area and to be more targeted and focused with the skills and strategies we introduce to students, based on a goal. It's also a way to guide teachers to help students make book choices; if students seem to need instruction in many of the goals, then the level of text they've selected is too challenging. Each goal encompasses a few skills, and all of them rely on comprehension in various ways.

At the top of the hierarchy is a goal called **Emergent Reading**. Emergent Reading is really a stage of reading development, when children first start becoming aware of how books—and eventually, print—work. As part of this goal, very young children rely on pictures to read: connecting pages in a storybook, learning information from informational texts. As they read from pictures, they are solidifying an understanding that reading is about making meaning: understanding what characters do and say; understanding how one event in the story leads to another; having their own ideas and reactions to the text; learning information and connecting information between parts and pages and to their own lives.

Goals, *Skills*, and *Strategies* Defined

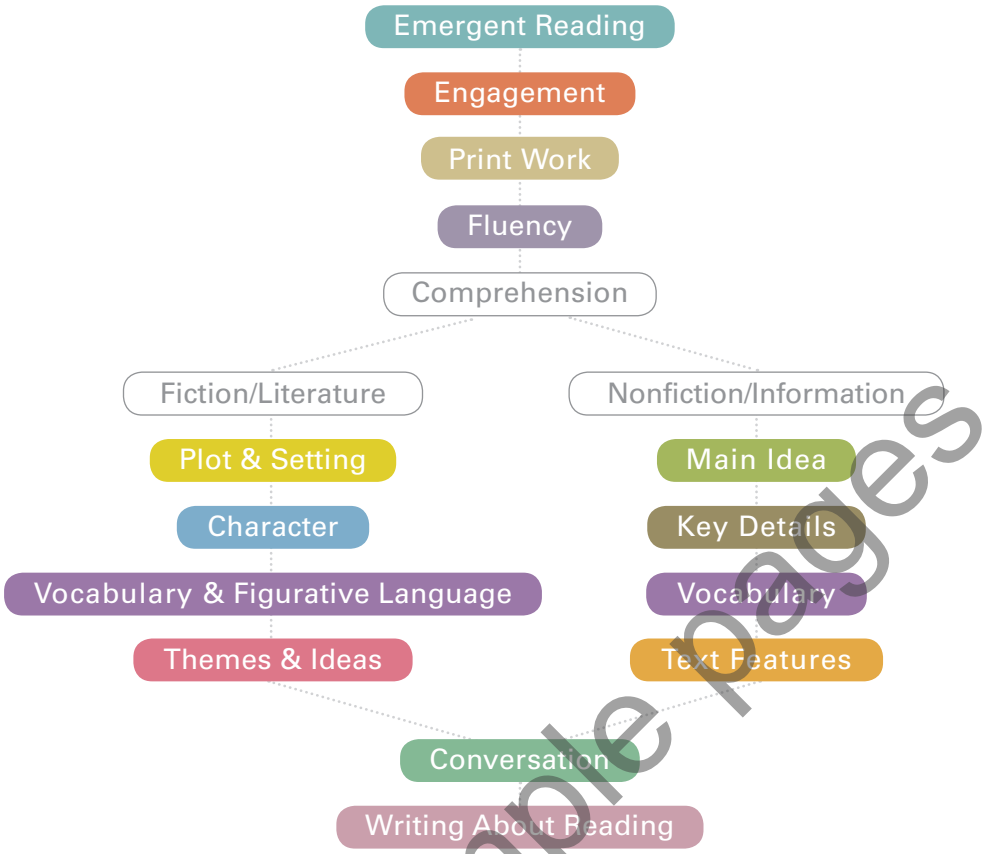
These three terms—*goals*, *skills*, *strategies*—are used in a variety of ways by a variety of reading researchers and practitioners. In this text, and in my other works, I use them consistently with both the way my former thought community at the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project uses the terms and Afflerbach, Pearson, and Paris' explanation (2008). Here are some brief definitions.

Goals: A large category. Something that readers can work toward for several weeks, more or less. Goals include multiple skills. Examples of goals include Fluency (which includes multiple skills, such as improving prosody, expression, and phrasing); Character (which includes inferring about character feelings, traits, changes, and relationships); and Conversation (which includes improving speaking and listening skills while in partnerships and book clubs).

Skills: A proficiency, something a reader is able to do. For comprehension, I refer to the seven areas—determining importance, retelling and synthesizing, activating prior knowledge, and so on—as "skills."

Strategies: A strategy is a step-by-step how-to to help a reader work toward a skill and/or a goal. A strategy is not a single word or phrase; rather it is a series of steps, like a recipe. After the reader is skilled, the need to apply conscious attention to the strategy fades away.

A Hierarchy of Reading Goals



From *The Reading Strategies Book* (Serravallo 2015)

Next on the hierarchy is **Engagement**. This goal includes skills like choosing books that will be interesting and being able to enter a state of "flow" or "the reading zone," enabling the reader to read for long stretches of time and with attentional focus (Csikszentmihalyi 1991; Atwell 2007). While it's possible to teach children strategies to be aware of their own attention, find better books, or read for longer stretches by breaking up their work into smaller page or time chunks, to really achieve engaged reading means to really comprehend. When they enter the state of flow during reading, many readers describe it as "making a movie in your mind," "slipping into the world of the story," and "walking in a character's shoes." This means engaged readers are strategic: they visualize, infer, synthesize events in the story, and more (Guthrie, McGough, Bennett, and Rice 1996). Therefore, sometimes what appears as a lack of *engagement* with reading actually has its roots in a *comprehension* difficulty; after all, it's boring to read something you aren't understanding.

Print Work is the next goal on the hierarchy, and it includes being able to read accurately, monitor one's own reading, use decoding and other word-solving strategies at a point of difficulty, and self-correct after a miscue. Some may incorrectly assume this goal is all about reading the words, but none of it can happen without understanding. As children read, they are constantly constructing meaning and use that together with their knowledge of how words work to figure out what the text says. In other words, proficient readers don't just "sound it out"—they think about the sounds the letters make while also thinking, "What's happening in the text right now? What word would make sense here?" They are also using their knowledge of language and the structure of sentences, or syntax, and thinking, "What kind of word would sound right in this spot in the sentence?" Researchers and theorists who have studied children's reading by taking running records refer to this juggling act using different terms. Clay (2000) describes it as "integrating sources of information," with the sources being meaning, syntax, and visual information. Goodman, Watson, and Burke (2005) use the terminology of "cueing systems" to refer to the same processes.

Fluency is the next goal, and it too relies on meaning-making. For example, fluent readers are able to read with proper phrasing, pausing in places in a sentence that maintain the author's meaning. Anyone who has read Truss' *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* (2006) knows that where you place a pause in a sentence can change the meaning of it. Or as the popular meme suggests, commas (and pauses) can save lives in sentences such as "Let's eat, Grandma." Fluent readers also read with intonation, expression, and emphasis. Again, meaning comes into play here. If I can understand that a character is sad, then when I read the dialogue (aloud or in my head) I can communicate the emotion. If I read a sentence in a happy voice, my misreading can impede my understanding. So, a reciprocal relationship exists between a reader's ability to communicate the meaning of the text through the way they read it, and the way they read it is informed by how well they understand (Rasinski 2003; Kuhn 2007).

For comprehension, I organize my thinking around goals that help me to prioritize ways to support readers with goals within a genre. This way of thinking about a reader orchestrating multiple skills for an overarching reading goal is influenced by the work of Lucy Calkins and the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project. For fiction, I use the goals of **Plot and Setting**, **Character**, **Vocabulary and Figurative Language**, and **Themes and Ideas**. For nonfiction, my goals are **Main Idea**, **Key Details**, **Vocabulary**, and **Text Features**. For each of the comprehension goals, the skills from the previously discussed proficient reader research (inferring, retelling, determining importance, and so on) are folded into the goals. See the tables on page 13 for details on which skills support readers with each goal. It is important to note that although these eight categories are under the "comprehension" heading, it is true that *all* of the thirteen goals relate to comprehension. These are headed as "comprehension" goals because they are focused on helping readers to go deeper within the text.

A HIERARCHY OF COMPREHENSION GOALS: **FICTION**

GOAL	SKILLS
Plot and Setting	• Retell important events • Synthesize cause and effect • Identify problems • Visualize setting
Character	• Infer about, interpret, and analyze main character(s) • Synthesize character change • Infer about, interpret, and analyze secondary character(s)
Vocabulary and Figurative Language	• Monitor for meaning and use context
Themes and Ideas	• Interpret a story by naming life lesson(s) or theme(s) • Identify and interpret social issues • Identify and interpret symbols

A HIERARCHY OF COMPREHENSION GOALS: **NONFICTION**

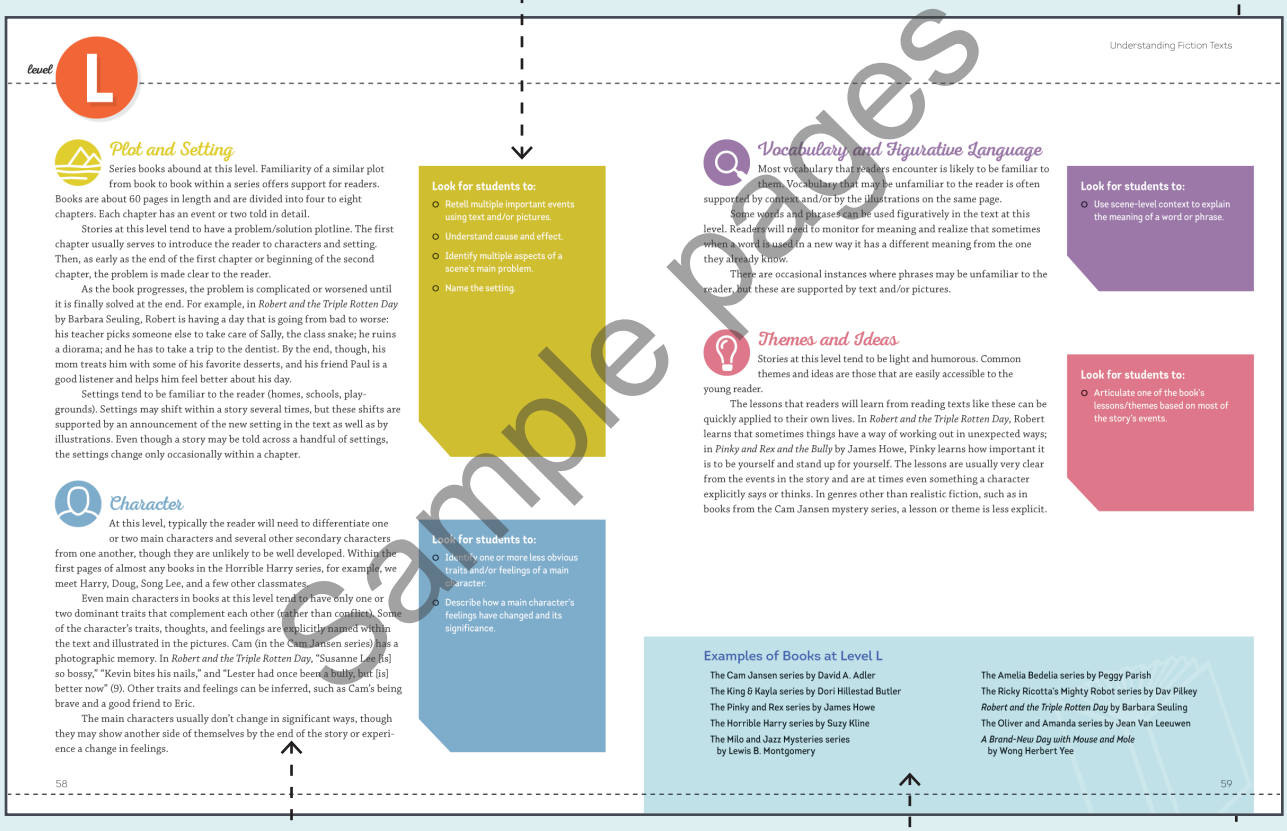
GOAL	SKILLS
Main Idea	• Synthesize and infer to determine the main idea(s) of a page, section, or chapter • Synthesize and infer to determine the main idea(s) of a whole book
Key Details	• Determine importance to support a main idea with key details from the text • Compare and contrast key details
Vocabulary	• Monitor for meaning and use context
Text Features	• Derive meaning from a text feature by synthesizing information from that feature, the text, and, if present, other text features

Next on the thirteen-goal hierarchy is **Conversation**. Included within Conversation are several speaking and listening skills, including actively listening; staying on-topic; using respectful language; questioning; using flexible thinking; debating; and more. For conversations to go well, though, readers need to do more than use conversational skills; they also need to understand the text deeply and bring conversation-worthy topics to the discussion table. At the same time, the opportunity to have conversation about texts can bring about deeper understanding (Keene 2012; Nichols 2006). It is important, therefore, to ensure that children both understand the texts they are reading and have regular, ample time for conversations about texts with pairs, groups, and the whole class to deepen those understandings and clarify misunderstandings.

Writing About Reading, the final goal on the hierarchy, includes a variety of types of informal, quick writing readers may do before, during, or after reading to help them prepare to read, hold on to ideas as they read, or explore ideas after reading. I think of formal, longer-form writing about reading, such as literary essays and book reviews, as something I'd likely teach during writing workshop; the writing here is meant to be a small part (proportionally) of students' reading time. As with conversation, it helps if children comprehend the text they are reading before they start to write about it (otherwise, kids are prone to just copy things from the text without understanding what they are writing down), and the act of writing in and of itself can help readers to clarify and deepen their thinking about texts.

No matter how you slice it—by skill or by goal—categories can be useful for examining the whole reader. We can use each part like a checklist to help develop a complete picture of what it means to comprehend a text and as a way to help us identify goals for students. Of course, any attempt at fitting something as complex and nuanced as the reading process into neat-and-tidy boxes and categories is likely to be flawed. Natural overlaps occur. For example, it is impossible to offer a strong retelling of a text without determining which events are most important. It's hard to use a fix-up strategy to determine the meaning of an unfamiliar word without activating prior knowledge about the topic. These goals are not offered as be-all-and-end-alls but rather as a way to help explain and manage a cognitive process that by its very nature is hard to codify.

A "look-fors" checklist that will allow you to apply the text complexity knowledge to student-written responses and conversation about books. This will help you apply what you know about text levels to *any* text at that level, even one you haven't read yourself. A more in-depth look at student development within and across levels begins on page 86. When the look-fors have changed from the previous level, it is indicated with a "shift from" note.



level L

Understanding Fiction Texts

Plot and Setting

Series books abound at this level. Familiarity of a similar plot from book to book within a series offers support for readers. Books are about 60 pages in length and are divided into four to eight chapters. Each chapter has an event or two told in detail.

Stories at this level tend to have a problem/solution plotline. The first chapter usually serves to introduce the reader to characters and setting. Then, as early as the end of the first chapter or beginning of the second chapter, the problem is made clear to the reader.

As the book progresses, the problem is complicated or worsened until it is finally solved at the end. For example, in *Robert and the Triple Rotten Day* by Barbara Seuling, Robert is having a day that is going from bad to worse: his teacher picks someone else to take care of Sally, the class snake; he ruins a diorama; and he has to take a trip to the dentist. By the end, though, his mom treats him with some of his favorite desserts, and his friend Paul is a good listener and helps him feel better about his day.

Settings tend to be familiar to the reader (homes, schools, playgrounds). Settings may shift within a story several times, but these shifts are supported by an announcement of the new setting in the text as well as by illustrations. Even though a story may be told across a handful of settings, the settings change only occasionally within a chapter.

Look for students to:
- Retell multiple important events using text and/or pictures.
- Understand cause and effect.
- Identify multiple aspects of a scene's main problem.
- Name the setting.

Character

At this level, typically the reader will need to differentiate one or two main characters and several other secondary characters from one another, though they are unlikely to be well developed. Within the first pages of almost any books in the Horrible Harry series, for example, we meet Harry, Doug, Song Lee, and a few other classmates.

Even main characters in books at this level tend to have only one or two dominant traits that complement each other (rather than conflict). Some of the character's traits, thoughts, and feelings are explicitly named within the text and illustrated in the pictures. Cam (in the Cam Jansen series) has a photographic memory. In *Robert and the Triple Rotten Day*, "Susanne Lee is] so bossy," "Kevin bites his nails," and "Lester had once been a bully, but [is] better now" (9). Other traits and feelings can be inferred, such as Cam's being brave and a good friend to Eric.

The main characters usually don't change in significant ways, though they may show another side of themselves by the end of the story or experience a change in feelings.

Look for students to:
- Identify one or more less obvious traits and/or feelings of a main character.
- Describe how a main character's feelings have changed and its significance.

Vocabulary and Figurative Language

Most vocabulary that readers encounter is likely to be familiar to them. Vocabulary that may be unfamiliar to the reader is often supported by context and/or by the illustrations on the same page.

Some words and phrases can be used figuratively in the text at this level. Readers will need to monitor for meaning and realize that sometimes when a word is used in a new way it has a different meaning from the one they already know.

There are occasional instances where phrases may be unfamiliar to the reader, but these are supported by text and/or pictures.

Look for students to:
- Use scene-level context to explain the meaning of a word or phrase.

Themes and Ideas

Stories at this level tend to be light and humorous. Common themes and ideas are those that are easily accessible to the young reader.

The lessons that readers will learn from reading texts like these can be quickly applied to their own lives. In *Robert and the Triple Rotten Day*, Robert learns that sometimes things have a way of working out in unexpected ways; in *Pinky and Rex and the Bully* by James Howe, Pinky learns how important it is to be yourself and stand up for yourself. The lessons are usually very clear from the events in the story and are at times even something a character explicitly says or thinks. In genres other than realistic fiction, such as in books from the Cam Jansen mystery series, a lesson or theme is less explicit.

Look for students to:
- Articulate one of the book's lessons/themes based on most of the story's events.

Examples of Books at Level L

- The Cam Jansen series by David A. Adler
- The King & Kayla series by Dori Hillestad Butler
- The Pinky and Rex series by James Howe
- The Horrible Harry series by Suzy Kline
- The Milo and Jazz Mysteries series by Lewis B. Montgomery
- The Amelia Bedelia series by Peggy Parish
- The Ricky Ricotta's Mighty Robot series by Dav Pilkey
- *Robert and the Triple Rotten Day* by Barbara Seuling
- The Oliver and Amanda series by Jean Van Leeuwen
- *A Brand-New Day with Mouse and Mole* by Wong Herbert Yee

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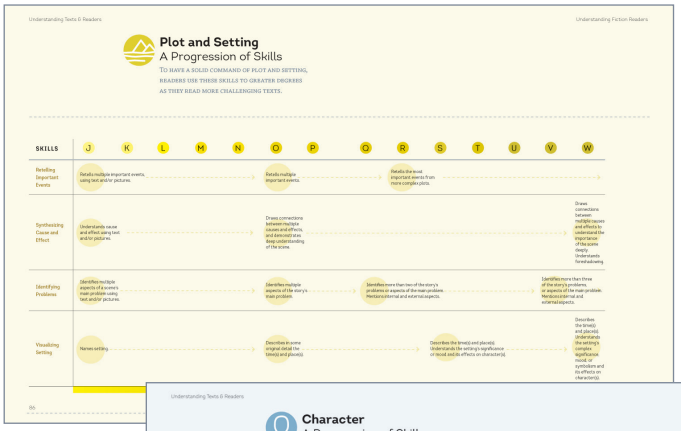
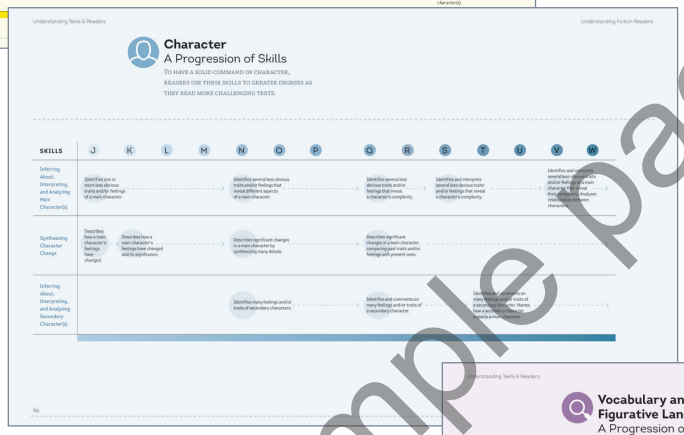
An overview of the text characteristics students will encounter in books at the level with regard to Plot and Setting, Character, Vocabulary and Figurative Language, and Themes and Ideas

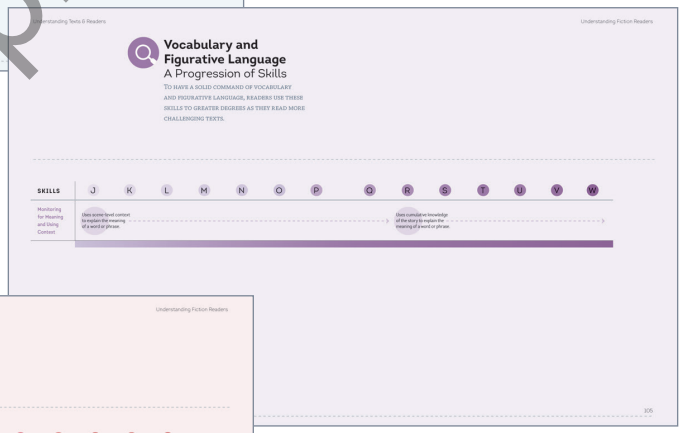
Examples of books at each level

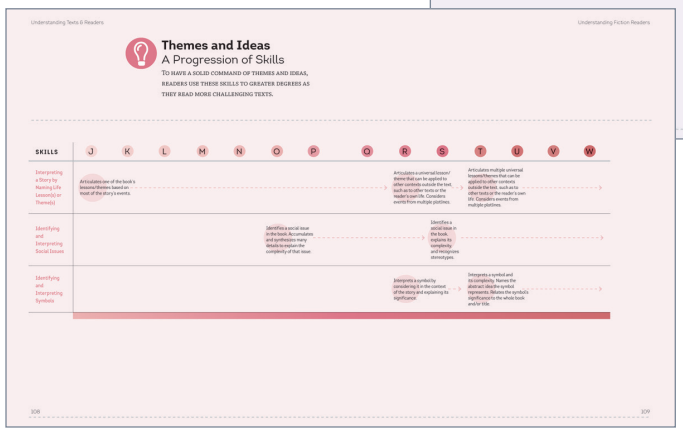
What's Ahead?

You can use the four Progression of Skills tables (on pages 86–87, 96–97, 104–105, and 108–109, thumbnails below), as quick references to see how changes in text characteristics result in changed expectations (also referred to as "look-fors" in the first half of this part) for readers. Each table is followed by examples that illustrate how students reading texts at different levels responded to their reading. Each response comes from a book you may or may not know—it doesn't matter either way. What these student work samples will help you to see is how the qualities of the responses change as students encounter more complex texts with more complex elements. I've offered descriptions of what to look for in the responses as captions for each student work sample. You can use these examples as illustrations of the "look-fors" and to use when studying your students' writing and/or speaking about their reading.







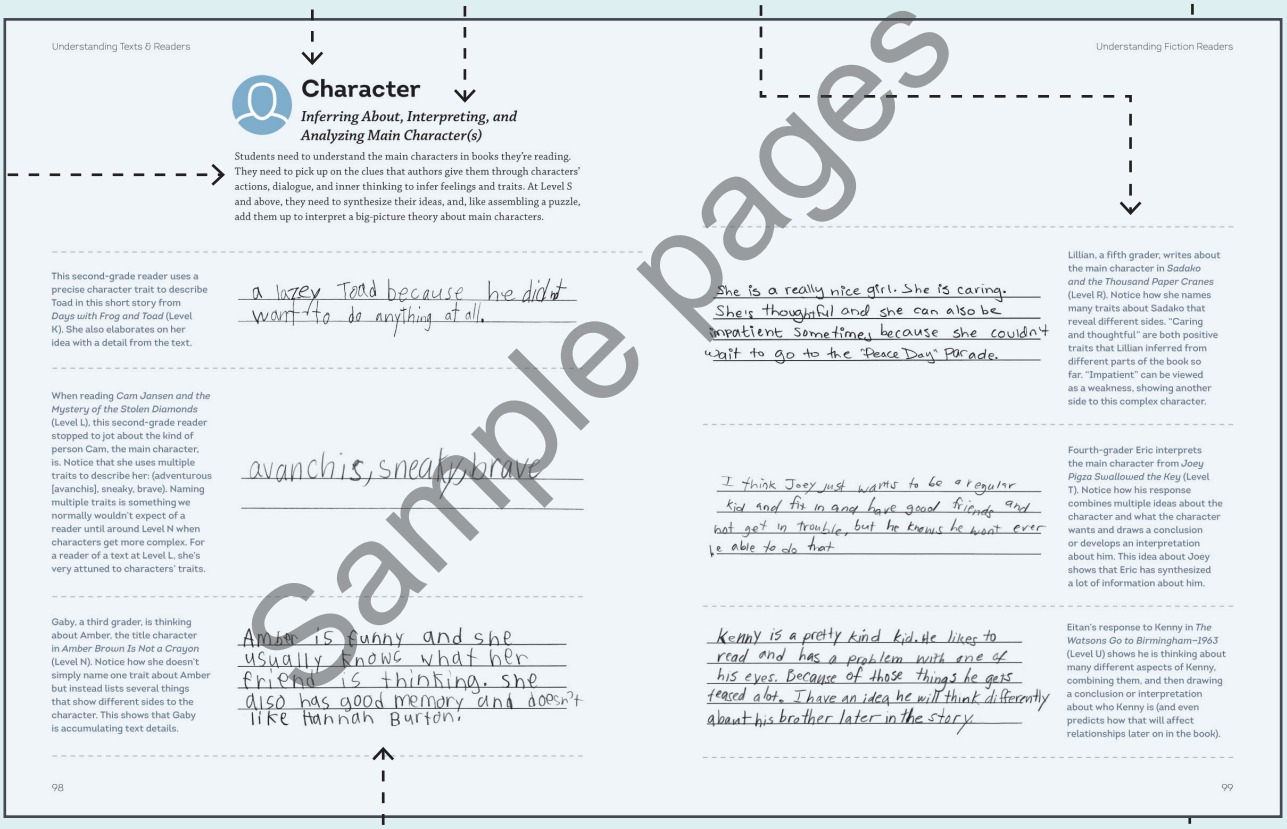


Goal

Skills

Caption explaining what to look for and how the response exemplifies strong comprehension at the level of text the student is reading

Overview of the skills



Understanding Texts & Readers

Character

Inferring About, Interpreting, and Analyzing Main Character(s)

Students need to understand the main characters in books they're reading. They need to pick up on the clues that authors give them through characters' actions, dialogue, and inner thinking to infer feelings and traits. At Level S and above, they need to synthesize their ideas, and, like assembling a puzzle, add them up to interpret a big-picture theory about main characters.

This second-grade reader uses a precise character trait to describe Toad in this short story from *Days with Frog and Toad* (Level K). She also elaborates on her idea with a detail from the text.

a lazey Toad because he didnt want to do anything at all.

When reading *Cam Jansen and the Mystery of the Stolen Diamonds* (Level L), this second-grade reader stopped to jot about the kind of person Cam, the main character, is. Notice that she uses multiple traits to describe her: (adventurous [avanchis], sneaky, brave). Naming multiple traits is something we normally wouldn't expect of a reader until around Level N when characters get more complex. For a reader of a text at Level L, she's very attuned to characters' traits.

avanchis, sneaky, brave

Gaby, a third grader, is thinking about Amber, the title character in *Amber Brown Is Not a Crayon* (Level N). Notice how she doesn't simply name one trait about Amber but instead lists several things that show different sides to the character. This shows that Gaby is accumulating text details.

Amber is funny and she usually knows what her friend is thinking. She also has good memory and doesn't like Hannah Burton.

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Understanding Fiction Readers

She is a really nice girl. She is caring. She's thoughtful and she can also be impatient sometimes because she couldn't wait to go to the "Peace Day" Parade.

Lillian, a fifth grader, writes about the main character in *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* (Level R). Notice how she names many traits about Sadako that reveal different sides. "Caring and thoughtful" are both positive traits that Lillian inferred from different parts of the book so far. "Impatient" can be viewed as a weakness, showing another side to this complex character.

I think Joey just wants to be a regular kid and fit in and have good friends and not get in trouble, but he knows he wont ever be able to do that

Fourth-grader Eric interprets the main character from *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key* (Level T). Notice how his response combines multiple ideas about the character and what the character wants and draws a conclusion or develops an interpretation about him. This idea about Joey shows that Eric has synthesized a lot of information about him.

Kenny is a pretty kind kid. He likes to read and has a problem with one of his eyes. Because of those things he gets teased a lot. I have an idea he will think differently about his brother later in the story.

Eitan's response to Kenny in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham–1963* (Level U) shows he is thinking about many different aspects of Kenny, combining them, and then drawing a conclusion or interpretation about who Kenny is (and even predicts how that will affect relationships later on in the book).

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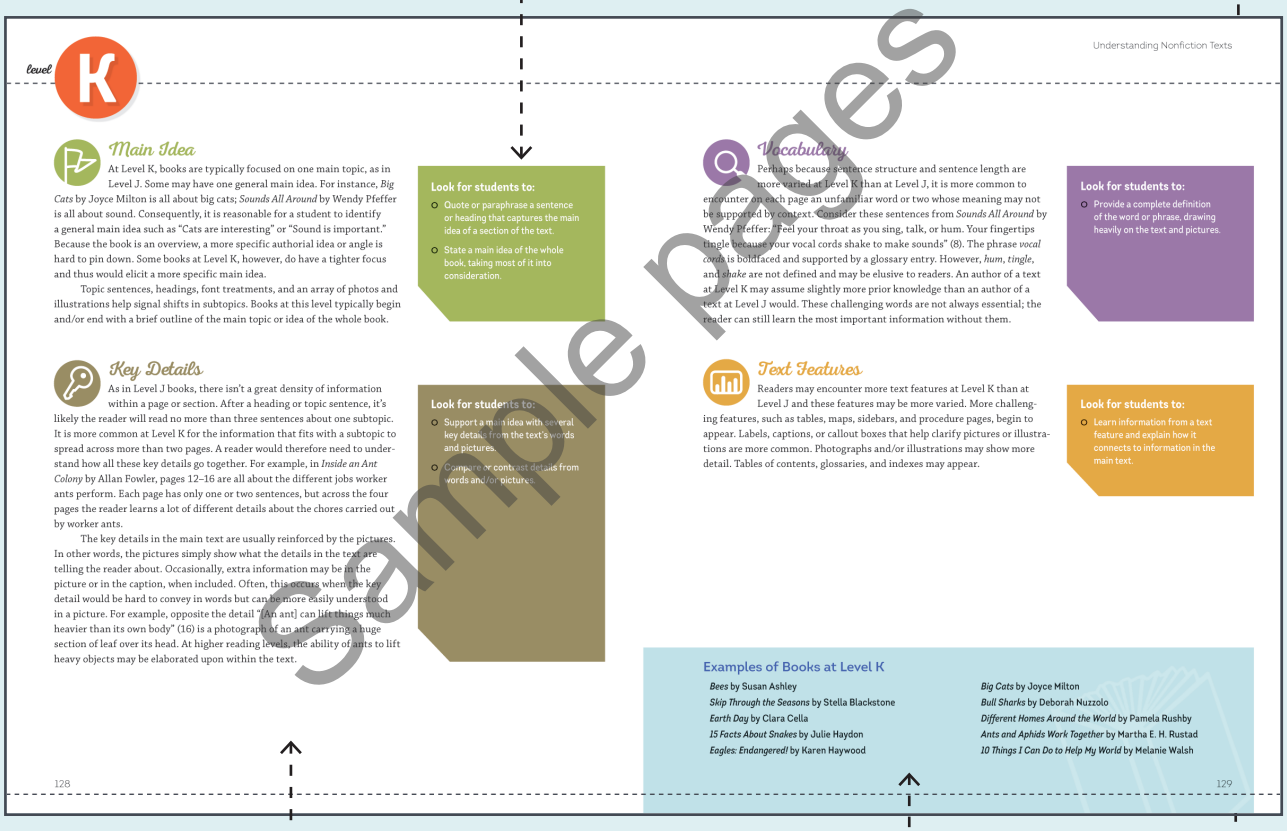
Sample pages

Student sample response

A "look-fors" checklist that will allow you to apply the text-complexity knowledge to student written responses and conversation about books. This will help you apply what you know about text levels to *any* text at that level, even one you haven't read yourself. A more in-depth look at student development within and across levels begins on page 158. When the look-fors have changed from the previous level, the change is indicated with a "shift from" note.



level K

Understanding Nonfiction Texts

Main Idea

At Level K, books are typically focused on one main topic, as in Level J. Some may have one general main idea. For instance, *Big Cats* by Joyce Milton is all about big cats; *Sounds All Around* by Wendy Pfeffer is all about sound. Consequently, it is reasonable for a student to identify a general main idea such as "Cats are interesting" or "Sound is important." Because the book is an overview, a more specific authorial idea or angle is hard to pin down. Some books at Level K, however, do have a tighter focus and thus would elicit a more specific main idea.

Topic sentences, headings, font treatments, and an array of photos and illustrations help signal shifts in subtopics. Books at this level typically begin and/or end with a brief outline of the main topic or idea of the whole book.

Look for students to:

- Quote or paraphrase a sentence or heading that captures the main idea of a section of the text.
- State a main idea of the whole book, taking most of it into consideration.

Key Details

As in Level J books, there isn't a great density of information within a page or section. After a heading or topic sentence, it's likely the reader will read no more than three sentences about one subtopic. It is more common at Level K for the information that fits with a subtopic to spread across more than two pages. A reader would therefore need to understand how all these key details go together. For example, in *Inside an Ant Colony* by Allan Fowler, pages 12–16 are all about the different jobs worker ants perform. Each page has only one or two sentences, but across the four pages the reader learns a lot of different details about the chores carried out by worker ants.

The key details in the main text are usually reinforced by the pictures. In other words, the pictures simply show what the details in the text are telling the reader about. Occasionally, extra information may be in the picture or in the caption, when included. Often, this occurs when the key detail would be hard to convey in words but can be more easily understood in a picture. For example, opposite the detail "[An ant] can lift things much heavier than its own body" (16) is a photograph of an ant carrying a huge section of leaf over its head. At higher reading levels, the ability of ants to lift heavy objects may be elaborated upon within the text.

Look for students to:

- Support a main idea with several key details from the text's words and pictures.
- Compare or contrast details from words and/or pictures.

Vocabulary

Perhaps because sentence structure and sentence length are more varied at Level K than at Level J, it is more common to encounter on each page an unfamiliar word or two whose meaning may not be supported by context. Consider these sentences from *Sounds All Around* by Wendy Pfeffer: "Feel your throat as you sing, talk, or hum. Your fingertips tingle because your vocal cords shake to make sounds" (8). The phrase *vocal cords* is boldfaced and supported by a glossary entry. However, *hum*, *tingle*, and *shake* are not defined and may be elusive to readers. An author of a text at Level K may assume slightly more prior knowledge than an author of a text at Level J would. These challenging words are not always essential; the reader can still learn the most important information without them.

Look for students to:

- Provide a complete definition of the word or phrase, drawing heavily on the text and pictures.

Text Features

Readers may encounter more text features at Level K than at Level J and these features may be more varied. More challenging features, such as tables, maps, sidebars, and procedure pages, begin to appear. Labels, captions, or callout boxes that help clarify pictures or illustrations are more common. Photographs and/or illustrations may show more detail. Tables of contents, glossaries, and indexes may appear.

Look for students to:

- Learn information from a text feature and explain how it connects to information in the main text.

Examples of Books at Level K

Bees by Susan Ashley
Skip Through the Seasons by Stella Blackstone
Earth Day by Clara Cella
15 Facts About Snakes by Julie Haydon
Eagles: Endangered! by Karen Haywood
Big Cats by Joyce Milton
Bull Sharks by Deborah Nuzzolo
Different Homes Around the World by Pamela Rushby
Ants and Aphids Work Together by Martha E. H. Rustad
10 Things I Can Do to Help My World by Melanie Walsh

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An overview of the text characteristics students will encounter in books at the level with regard to Main Idea, Key Details, Vocabulary, and Text Features.

Examples of books at each level

What's Ahead?

You can use the four Progression of Skills tables (on pages 158–159, 164–165, 170–171, and 174–175, thumbnails to the right) as quick references to see how changes in text characteristics result in changed expectations for readers.

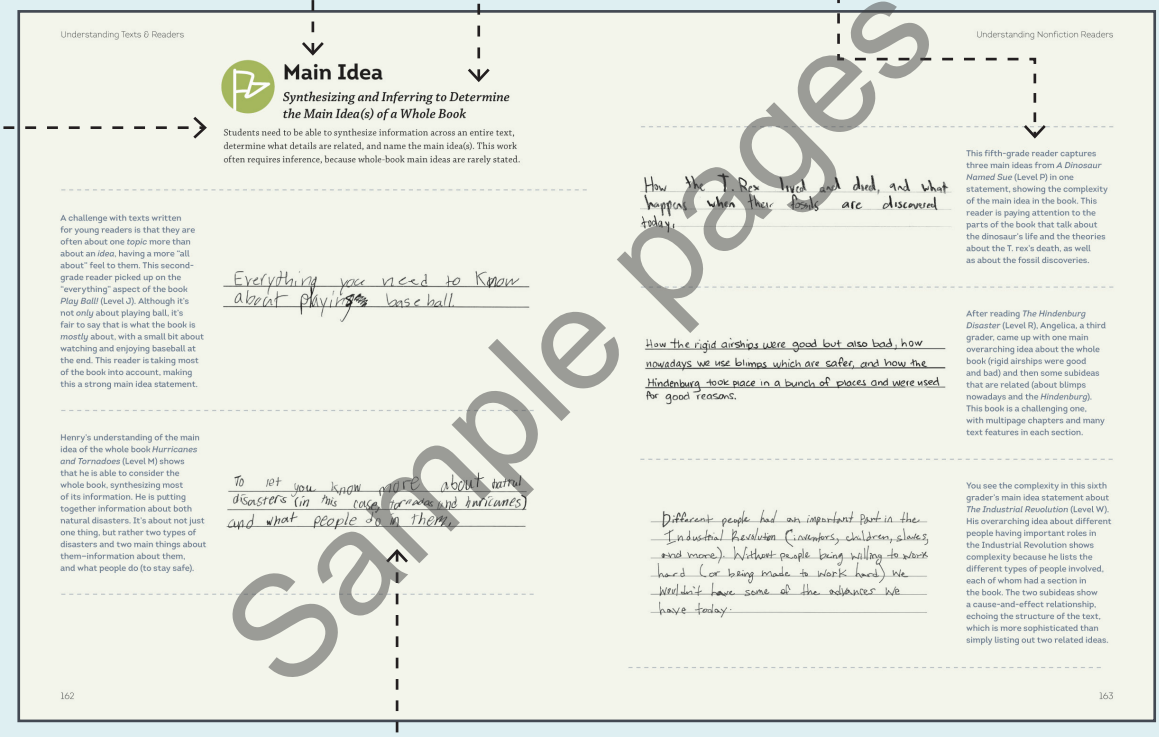
Following each table, you'll find examples that illustrate how students reading texts at a range of levels responded to their reading. Next to each student work sample is an annotation that describes what to notice about the response and how and why the response is an example of strong comprehension at the level in question. Each response comes from a book you may or may not know—either way, it doesn't matter, because the purpose of these samples is to understand *qualities* of student response. You can use these examples as illustrations of the "look-fors" you read about on pages 126–153. They will be helpful when studying your students' writing and/or speaking about their reading.

Goal

Skills

Caption explaining what to look for and how the response exemplifies strong comprehension at the level of text the student is reading

Overview of the skills



Understanding Texts & Readers

Understanding Nonfiction Readers

Main Idea

Synthesizing and Inferring to Determine the Main Idea(s) of a Whole Book

Students need to be able to synthesize information across an entire text, determine what details are related, and name the main idea(s). This work often requires inference, because whole-book main ideas are rarely stated.

A challenge with texts written for young readers is that they are often about one *topic* more than about an *idea*, having a more "all about" feel to them. This second-grade reader picked up on the "everything" aspect of the book *Play Ball!* (Level J). Although it's not *only* about playing ball, it's fair to say that is what the book is *mostly* about, with a small bit about watching and enjoying baseball at the end. This reader is taking most of the book into account, making this a strong main idea statement.

Everything you need to know about playing baseball.

Henry's understanding of the main idea of the whole book *Hurricanes and Tornadoes* (Level M) shows that he is able to consider the whole book, synthesizing most of its information. He is putting together information about both natural disasters. It's about not just one thing, but rather two types of disasters and two main things about them–information about them, and what people do (to stay safe).

To let you know more about natural disasters (in this case tornadoes and hurricanes) and what people do in them.

How the T. Rex lived and died, and what happens when their bones are discovered today.

This fifth-grade reader captures three main ideas from *A Dinosaur Named Sue* (Level P) in one statement, showing the complexity of the main idea in the book. This reader is paying attention to the parts of the book that talk about the dinosaur's life and the theories about the T. rex's death, as well as about the fossil discoveries.

How the rigid airships were good but also bad, how nowadays we use blimps which are safer, and how the Hindenburg took place in a bunch of places and were used for good reasons.

After reading *The Hindenburg Disaster* (Level R), Angelica, a third grader, came up with one main overarching idea about the whole book (rigid airships were good and bad) and then some subideas that are related (about blimps nowadays and the *Hindenburg*). This book is a challenging one, with multipage chapters and many text features in each section.

Different people had an important part in the Industrial Revolution (inventors, children, slaves and more). Without people being willing to work hard (or being made to work hard) we wouldn't have some of the advances we have today.

You see the complexity in this sixth grader's main idea statement about *The Industrial Revolution* (Level W). His overarching idea about different people having important roles in the Industrial Revolution shows complexity because he lists the different types of people involved, each of whom had a section in the book. The two subideas show a cause-and-effect relationship, echoing the structure of the text, which is more sophisticated than simply listing out two related ideas.

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Student sample response

Using a Variety of Reading Strategies

Content for Teaching Comprehension

The strategies you offer students must not only support their goals, but also align with the level of text the child is reading. Having a knowledge of text levels will help you craft and choose strategies that will work best for each individual student.

What Is a Reading Strategy?

My definition of "strategy" is a step-by-step how-to that a teacher may offer a student as a scaffold as they work toward a goal. In my definition, a strategy is never a word or short phrase but rather a series of phrases or sentences that break down the thinking work into a recipe of sorts (Afflerbach, Pearson, and Paris 2008; Serravallo 2015).

To craft strategies for my students, I find it helpful to think about my own process. Let me walk you through my thinking, using a

Whether you're working with students individually, in small groups, or as a whole class, it can be helpful to keep the level of text they are reading in mind as you choose and craft strategies to offer them.

nonfiction text and considering the strategies I might use to support a reader who is working to determine main idea.

Looking at a section in the text *Ants, Bees and Other Social Insects* by Kris Hirschmann, I notice a boldfaced topic sentence that reads, "All social insects use smell and sound to help them communicate" (12). This repeated feature helps to direct the reader to what the section is mostly about. Several plain-text sentences follow to support the statement.

To explain how I'd use this bolded topic sentence, I might say, "I read the bold heading. Then, I read the rest of the section. Then, I look back at the bold heading and ask myself, 'Does it seem like most of the facts in this section connect back to the heading?' "

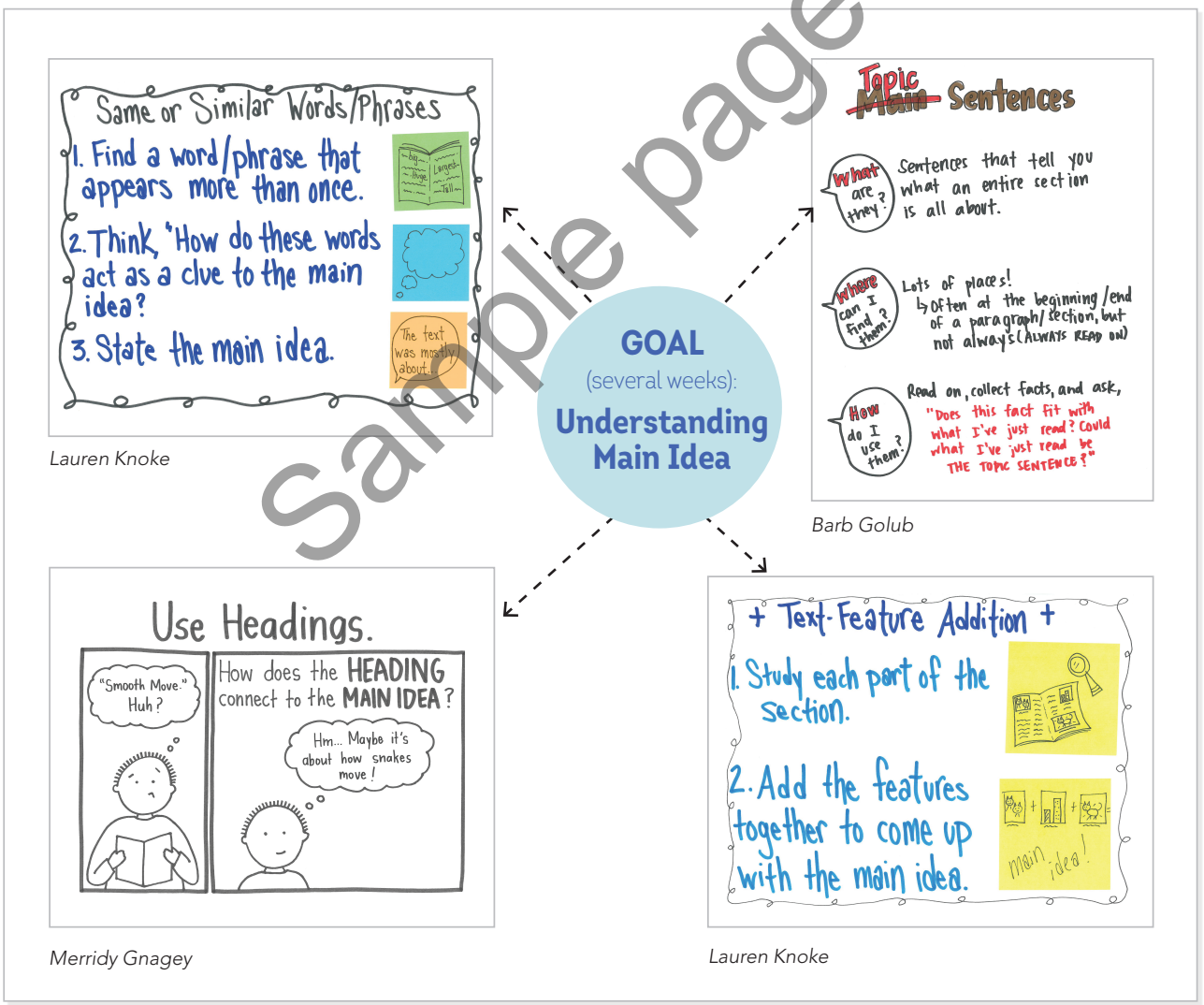
Looking at the same spread, I also notice a lot of repeated words or synonyms. When taken together, these words could help me figure out what the page is mostly about. I see *smell*, *stinky*, *scent trail*, *chemical scent*, *smell* again; then *sound*, *squeak*, *sounds* again, *buzzing noise*, and *speak* (12–13). This collection of cohesive words definitely helps me realize the section is about how animals use smells and sounds. So, I could phrase this as a strategy in a step-by-step way by saying, "I look across the section for words that are the same or similar (synonyms). I think about how those repeated or similar words all relate back to the topic. I use the common words in a main idea statement."

In both examples, I'm trying to unpack a process for readers, to tell them more than *what to do* and instead offer them support with *how to do it*.

WHAT YOU MIGHT TEACH A READER TO DO (NOT A STRATEGY)	HOW A READER MIGHT DO IT (A STRATEGY)
Figure out the main idea	Read the bold heading. Then, read the rest of the section. Next, look back at the bolded heading and ask yourself, "Does it seem like most of the facts in this section connect back to the heading?"
Understand a vocabulary word	Read the sentence before the word, the sentence that contains the word, and the sentence that follows the word. Think about how the information relates to the word you're trying to figure out. Insert a synonym that makes sense in place of the word.
Study the photograph	Look at the photograph as a whole. Name what you see. Zoom in on parts of the photograph. Name what you see in each part. Explain what the photograph teaches you.

Articulating strategies is a way to make your teaching explicit and to offer children a scaffold they can use as they practice working on their goal during lessons and during independent reading. Notice that the phrasing of the strategies is general enough that students can apply the procedure to book after book, which will encourage transfer and repeated practice. Throughout this repeated practice, the strategy should eventually become automatic, meaning that the student will not need to apply conscious attention to the steps any longer, and the strategy can fade into the background. For 300 strategies, many of which align to the comprehension goals discussed in this book, see *The Reading Strategies Book* (Serravallo 2015).

Remember, the strategy is just a means to work toward a goal; after the student has demonstrated they are using the strategy with automaticity, conscious attention to the steps is no longer necessary. Most students will be working on a goal for several weeks, and during that time they should learn multiple strategies. (See web below.)



Using Your Knowledge of Text Levels When Deciding Which Strategies to Teach

Although it's important to word a strategy in a way that will allow the reader to apply it from book to book to allow for repeated practice and transfer, a single strategy will not necessarily work for every book. It's important to consider the complexities, features, and characteristics of the level of text the student is reading to state the strategy in a way that will actually work in that text.

Let's practice applying what you know about text levels to this discussion of appropriate strategies for readers who are working on reading books in those levels. Let's start with fiction and consider two readers—one reading *Days with Frog and Toad* (Level K) (1979) and another reading *Because of Winn-Dixie* (Level R) (2000). Let's say their goal is the same: to understand Plot and Setting. Would the strategies we teach them be the same? First, let's review what we know about the plots and settings of Levels K and R, from pages 56 and 70.

Comparing Plot and Setting Text Characteristics at Levels K and R

LEVEL K	LEVEL R
• Episodic chapters, stories across several chapters, or single stories without chapter breaks. In any case, the plot is sequential with one event clearly leading to the next. • Settings tend to be familiar. • Setting shifts are supported by illustrations. • Clear problem-solution story structure.	• Flashbacks and foreshadowing are common. • No single plot; often includes subplots or multiple plotlines. • Many settings will be unfamiliar to readers. • Settings are not only background; they take on central importance to the plot. • Multiple problems that get resolved rather than solved.

Let's take one of the skills associated with the goal of understanding Plot and Setting: visualizing setting. If I were working with a child reading a book at Level K, I'd likely teach the child strategies that help them to use the illustration on the page, together with their background knowledge of when they've been to a place like that, to describe the place where the story is happening. Would that work with a child reading a book at Level R? Likely not. First of all, most Level R books don't include illustrations, so asking a child to refer to them would be confusing. Activating prior knowledge might be helpful, but not in the same way as for a child who is thinking about a time he's been to a place like that. For a student reading *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* (2004), who has never been to post–WWII Japan, that's

impossible. However, you could suggest that the student carefully read the description of the setting and use any images they have seen in books or on TV that relate to the same time and place, to help them imagine the setting.

Let's take another Plot and Setting–related skill: retelling important events. For a child reading a book at Level K, because the plot is often centered on a main problem, I'd likely teach the student to anchor their retelling on the problem, identifying it, explaining how it becomes more challenging, and finally revealing how the problem is solved. The plots are sequential and one event clearly leads to the next, so this strategy would be helpful. Not so with the student reading a book at Level R, where they are likely to encounter plots and subplots, flashbacks, and foreshadowing. In this situation, a simple sequential retelling won't suffice. Instead, I might teach students reading texts at Level R to think of each chapter as having one main event. At the end of each chapter, they can say in a sentence what is the main thing that happened in that chapter. Then, they can put together all the events when retelling the entire book. For students working on making sense of more than one main plotline, I might invite them to keep two plot mountain graphic organizers in front of them as they read. Each time they come to a new, significant event, they could jot it down on the corresponding plot mountain. At the end of the book, they could think about how the events from each of the two plot mountains connect.

Please see the chart on pages 230–231 for more examples and explanations of how I consider text complexity when crafting or choosing strategies for readers.

Understanding the levels, or more likely level *ranges*, that will work best with each strategy can help you group your students to work with efficiency. I find that I tend to group children mostly by their goal (e.g., all students working on strategies for vocabulary in one group) rather than level (e.g., all students reading Level R books in one group). However, I do consider the level of text they are reading when forming the group because I want to be sure that the strategy I'm offering them makes sense with the books they're reading. For example, it's likely that I'd form a group of students working on the goal of Character with levels ranging from J to M or N to P because the complexity of characters in each of those level ranges is similar.

In sum, whether you're working with students individually, in small groups, or as a whole class, it can be helpful to keep the level of text they are reading in mind as you choose and craft strategies to offer them.

SAMPLE STRATEGIES ALIGNED TO LEVELS OF TEXT: **FICTION**

SAMPLE STRATEGY	WHAT TEXT LEVELS IS IT BEST FOR?	WHY?
 **Character:** Look at a character's face in the picture. Notice how the character is feeling. Name the feeling.	J–O	At Levels P and above, frequent illustrations of characters inside the story are rare. At higher levels, students will need to infer character feelings based on descriptions in the text and will need to visualize the character's facial expressions rather than rely on an illustration.
 **Character:** Think of what problems the character is dealing with internally, that can't be seen. Notice how the character feels in response to those problems, and what they are doing to solve the problems.	N–W	In levels up to M, characters tend to be dealing with a clear, *external* problem (e.g., a hat that won't fit, a kite that won't fly, solving the mystery of the missing key). Although characters do have feelings, their internal struggles aren't as developed as you'll find in books at Level N and above.
 **Themes and Ideas:** Reread the last sentence or two in the story. Notice what the character learns. Think about what you can learn.	J–M	In texts at Levels J–M, the stories often are wrapped up with a brief lesson at the very end. With little inference required, a reader should be able to figure out a lesson. At higher levels, students will often need to read the final chapter and think about the main struggles of the character to infer a theme. Also, at higher levels, there are often multiple themes to consider.
 **Themes and Ideas:** Notice when an object is repeated in the text. Think about what idea it might represent. Consider how it connects to something in the story—a character, setting, central problem, and so on.	Q–W	Concrete objects start to represent abstract ideas in Levels Q and above. Although a reader could infer a deeper symbolic meaning of Toad's hat in *Days with Frog and Toad,* I wouldn't teach it to a child reading a text at that level.

SAMPLE STRATEGIES ALIGNED TO LEVELS OF TEXT: **NONFICTION**

SAMPLE STRATEGY	WHAT TEXT LEVELS IS IT BEST FOR?	WHY?
Main Idea: Scan the table of contents, and notice the topics and subtopics the book will be covering. Think about what each section—as well as the whole book—is mostly about.	J–W	As long as the book has a table of contents, this will be helpful.
Main Idea: Point around the page, saying what each text feature is teaching you. Put all the information together to say what the page is mostly about.	M–W	Below Level M, readers are likely to read nonfiction texts that are set up with main text and a single illustration or photograph on the page. This isn't always true, and there are certainly texts at higher levels that follow the text-plus-photo layout (see, for example, most books by Seymour Simon).
Key Details: Notice when an author includes a fact meant to shock, amaze, or entertain you. Think, "Is this fact central to what the section is mostly about, or is it extra information meant to help engage me as a reader?"	M–W	In lower-level texts, most of the facts will fit cohesively with the main idea or main topic on the page. At higher levels, with busier pages, you will start to notice facts that feel more ancillary to the main idea, though they are related to the topic.
Vocabulary: Separate the unknown word into a prefix, root, and/or suffix. Analyze each part, thinking of words you know that have similar parts and what those parts mean. Put the information together to figure out that word.	R–W	It is unlikely that students will have knowledge of Greek and Latin roots, or will have explored cognates in word study, before they are in fourth grade. I recommend saving this strategy for students reading on a fourth-grade level, around Level R.

What Research Says About Comprehension Instruction

A student's academic progress throughout secondary school is profoundly shaped by the extent to which they understand what they read (Sweet and Snow 2003).

Teachers who emphasize higher-order thinking and strategic approaches to comprehension processes promote greater reading growth (Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, and Rodriguez 2003).

Choice, interesting texts, and strategy instruction yield readers who are highly strategic and comprehend more deeply (Guthrie, Wigfield, Barbosa, et al. 2004).

Small groups and individual conferring make a difference. Students who work on comprehension strategies with teacher-student ratios of 1:1 or 1:3 outperformed those in a 1:10 group (Linan-Thompson and Hickman-Davis 2002).

Interventions that accelerate reading development typically spend most of their time (two-thirds) on reading and rereading, rather than skill practice in isolation (Allington 2011b).