

**THE**  
**Reading**  
**Comprehension**  
**BLUEPRINT**

**Helping Students  
Make Meaning from Text**

**Nancy Lewis Hennessy**

**FOREWORD BY LOUISA COOK MOATS**



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# About the Author

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Ms. Hennessy is an experienced teacher, diagnostician, and administrator who currently works as a literacy consultant. Nancy has worked across grade levels K–12 with both general and special educators. While in public schools, she provided leadership in the development of innovative curriculum for students with special needs and a statewide revision of special education code, and she led a state-of-the-art professional development program for all teachers. She is a former Wilson Language Lead Trainer and National Trainer for *Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling* (LETRS; Sopris-West).

Nancy has delivered keynote addresses, workshops, and training to educators nationally and internationally on topics including professional development, strategic planning, and components of skilled reading and writing and dyslexia. She has also developed professional development offerings on reading instruction for the AIM Institute of Learning & Research and on dyslexia for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. Most recently, Nancy has focused on delivering virtual and in-person professional learning opportunities focused on reading comprehension.

Nancy coauthored the second revision of Module 6 of LETRS, *Digging for Meaning: Teaching Text Comprehension*, and authored Chapter 15, “Working with Word Meaning: Vocabulary Instruction,” in *Multisensory Teaching of Basic Language Skills*, Fourth Edition (Birsh & Carreker, 2018).

Nancy has held various positions for the International Dyslexia Association (IDA), including President, Branch Council Chair, and National Conference Chair. She also served on the National Joint Committee for Learning Disabilities. She is an honorary member of the Delta Kappa Gamma Society, the 2011 recipient of IDA’s Margaret Rawson Lifetime Achievement Award, and the recipient of the 2012 June Lyday Orton Award from the North Carolina Branch of IDA (NCIDA).

# Preface

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“Learning is the Work.”—Fullan, 2011

I recognized early on that I did not possess the necessary knowledge base and skills to meet the needs of my students in general and then special education. This realization continued as I moved from teaching students to teaching their teachers. It prompted me to find answers and continue learning. It also led to a realization that change would be a constant in my professional life. This book is a result of that realization.

Our students have the right to learn how to read, and consequently, we have the responsibility to teach them. This means we must also be learners; it is our work as well as that of our students. The science tells us that proficient reading requires both word recognition and language comprehension abilities. For many years, I focused on the development of word recognition, namely phonological awareness, decoding, and sight recognition, which are the strands identified in Scarborough’s (2001) Reading Rope. I became increasingly interested in language comprehension and, ultimately, reading comprehension, however. This was a direct result of my work as a National Trainer for LETRS (Sopris-West) and the support of Louisa Moats, the principal author of LETRS. As I taught the original and second edition of the module on comprehension, it led to more reading, researching, and generating ideas about the complexity of contributors to reading comprehension. Based on my own experience and conversations with educators, I also became increasingly aware that comprehension instruction often focused on specific or individual skills or student products. It did not necessarily acknowledge the complicated nature of this construct and that language and cognitive processes are necessary for constructing meaning and demonstrating understanding.

The blueprint for reading comprehension is a comprehensive framework for instruction. It acknowledges that comprehension is complex and that critical processes are necessary for creating products. The framework reflects the science of reading, and the language comprehension strands of Scarborough’s (2001) Reading Rope are the foundation for instructional focus. It is designed to structure the practitioner’s delivery of effective instruction. Each component of the blueprint raises questions the informed educator may ask him- or herself as he or she prepares and plans for instruction. The initial two chapters provide critical background knowledge on the nature of skilled reading and reading comprehension. The following chapters (Chapters 4–8) respond to questions about each component by providing definitions, connections to classroom, discussion of each component’s contributions to comprehension, instructional strategies, and assessment activities. The final chapter addresses important issues related to instructional planning, implementation, and professional learning.

I think we all recognize that our students are reading more challenging texts and are required to produce or demonstrate their understandings of these readings. Comprehending these texts requires extracting and constructing meaning using multiple interacting processes and skills. The blueprint focuses on developing those processes and skills necessary for a quality product. It provides guidance for preparing the text for instruction.

Implementing the blueprint will require a change in instructional practice for most educators, which will take commitment, courage, and time. I have taught the blueprint to many educators and recognize that instructional contexts and supports vary widely. Although all components deserve

attention, I have advised that a “one bite at a time” or intentional focus on one component is often more manageable.

I also know that educational change is difficult and susceptible to resistance. I recommend educators who are open to change find colleagues with whom they can collaborate and create change. After, all it is difficult to stay silent when we recognize that a change in practice directly benefits our students. We have a responsibility to keep working and learning.

I am hopeful that this book will foster connections, reflection, and action resulting in changes in your practice. Thank you for your commitment to learning.

## REFERENCES

- Fullan, M. (2011). *The six secrets of change: What the best leaders do to help their organizations survive and thrive*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Scarborough, H. (2001). Connecting early language and literacy to later reading disabilities: Evidence, theory and practice. In S. B. Neuman & D. K. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook of early literacy research* (pp. 97–110). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

# CHAPTER 1

## Dimensions of Skilled Reading

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### Connecting to Educators' Critical Background Knowledge

“Skilled reading [is] the fluent execution and coordination of text comprehension and word recognition.”

—Scarborough (2001, p. 98)

#### PREVIEW & REFLECT!

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*Prior to reading Chapter 1, review and reflect on the questions that follow, considering varied factors that influence the development of skilled readers in school.*

- *What challenges do your students encounter as they read complex texts?*
- *In what ways are current initiatives in your setting supporting student and professional proficiency?*
- *What do you know about models of skilled reading?*
- *What is the connection between language and literacy?*

## THE BLUEPRINT INVENTORY OF READING COMPREHENSION KNOWLEDGE

The knowledge and skills you bring to the design and delivery of instruction matter. As a proficient reader, you consistently gain access to and connect what you know with information presented in print. As educators, we know that our background knowledge serves as “mental Velcro” that supports organization and recall of new learning. The blueprint inventory (see Appendix 1.1) can assist you in activating what you know and also identify what you may want to focus on as you read the chapters in this book. Before you continue, take a few moments to complete this survey of knowledge in Appendix 1.1 with these purposes in mind. After you finish reading this book, you can revisit the inventory, respond again, and celebrate having acquired an increased knowledge base that will benefit your students.

## CONNECTING SKILLED READING TO THE CLASSROOM

Any educational endeavor should always keep the student in mind, regardless of focus. Although the hope is that readers will find the content of this book interesting and helpful, it matters little if it does not influence student learning. Let’s purposefully begin by bringing students into this discussion. Consider what they need to know to read the following texts and then respond to questions that reflect varied levels of understanding that align with local and state standards. It is important to keep these hypothetical students, your students, and others in mind as we work with the contents of this text.

- Lily, an incoming ninth grader, had a summer reading assignment that included *Animal Farm* (Orwell, 1945) and related informational articles on the Russian Revolution.
- Will, a seventh-grade student, is reading the article, “The Founding of American Democracy” (McBirney, 2016) from CommonLit.
- Matt, a fifth grader, is wrestling with the novel, *Tuck Everlasting* (Babbit, 1975).
- Kayla is reading about mummies in Grade 4, including the selection “The Mystery of the Tattooed Mummy” (Rattini, 2007) from *National Geographic Kids*.
- Jermaine, a third-grade student, is reading about activists such as Benjamin Banneker and Rosa Parks.
- Antonio is listening to *The Velveteen Rabbit* (Williams, 1992) with his first-grade class.
- Maria, a kindergarten student, is listening as her teacher shares *Frog Goes to Dinner* (Mayer, 2003).

Each of these students comes to the text with different abilities, experiences, and interests. They will be asked to respond to tasks requiring varied abilities and levels of understanding. The everyday demands of all classrooms present multiple challenges, depending on the proficiency of each reader, the text, the task assigned, and, of course, the context, including the expertise of the educators. Our students have the right to learn to how to read proficiently, and we have the responsibility to be prepared to teach them.

## SURFACING CRITICAL KNOWLEDGE: THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

Our discussion of comprehension and comprehension instruction not only requires us to make connections to students but also calls for understanding the educational context, including student performance levels, relevant educational initiatives, and current knowledge regarding the acquisition of skilled reading. This background knowledge is addressed in the following sections and should serve to surface connections for you and inform your understanding of subsequent chapter contents—contents that will directly address the complexities of reading comprehension and present an evidence-based framework for comprehension instruction.

## Student Performance and Proficiency

Educators are well aware of the increasing demands for student achievement reflected in policy, standards, and educational initiatives. Reading proficiency, which is the ability to read words and make meaning, is a high priority. Students' reading skills are typically assessed by their response to questions based on selected grade-appropriate materials. In other words, reading comprehension is a proxy for skilled reading and is the measuring stick by which overall progress is typically determined. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is administered every 2 years in Grades 4 and 8 as well as periodically in Grade 12. Students are asked to read varied text types, including literary (fiction, nonfiction, and poetry) and informational passages (exposition, argumentation and persuasive texts, procedural texts, and documents), and then locate or recall, integrate or interpret, and critique or evaluate the information read.

What factors in the educational setting are relevant to our discussion of reading comprehension?

To date, student NAEP results have been disappointing (see Figure 1.1). In 2019, results declined slightly from prior years. About a third of students in fourth grade (34%) performed at or above the proficient level, with approximately another third (31%) at the basic level. This is hardly good news because 35% of students continue to fall below basic levels of proficiency. Percentages at these levels are generally lower for students with learning disabilities as well as children of color or children of poverty (NAEP, 2019). What exactly do these proficiency levels mean for students? According to NAEP descriptors, performance at a basic level is indicative of partial mastery of skills necessary for “solid academic performance” at a specific grade level. For example, fourth graders at this level are able “to locate relevant information, make simple inferences, and use their understanding of the text to identify details that support a given interpretation or conclusion” (<https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/reading/achieve.aspx>). Although these are important and necessary skills, they are not sufficient to grapple with the academic language of text and increasing demands of school. No descriptor is provided for “below basic,” but one can infer its meaning; less than partial mastery spells a lack of success for these students.

On a prior international measure, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA; 2011), 15-year-old students in the United States were consistently outperformed by those from Australia, New Zealand, Shanghai, and others. Mark Seidenberg (2017), a leading researcher, summed up what many have been feeling and thinking, namely that “our country is a chronic underachiever” (p. 5).

## Past and Current Initiatives

The intent is not to dismiss or minimize past and present efforts, at multiple levels, focused on the literacy needs of students. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 (PL 114-95) called for educational systems to adopt challenging academic standards, assess students in reading and math in Grades 3-8, and develop an evidence-based plan to support those students falling behind, which includes minority students or those in special education. Anyone who works in public schools is familiar with initiatives such as response to intervention (RTI) and multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS). The integration of multiple systems and services to address student needs academically and behaviorally is a primary focus of these initiatives. Although there is some confusion about the differences between RTI and MTSS, both align with the intent of ESSA. Generally, MTSS is a more comprehensive, coherent approach that encompasses RTI and calls for greater alignment of policies, practices, and resources. Commonly required features for both include

- Universal screening (identification of potential difficulties)
- Provision of a continuum of evidence-based practices and supports (core, prevention, and intensive instruction and supports)
- Data-based decision making and problem solving (use of data to inform necessary levels of support)
- Continuous progress monitoring (effectiveness of supports provided)

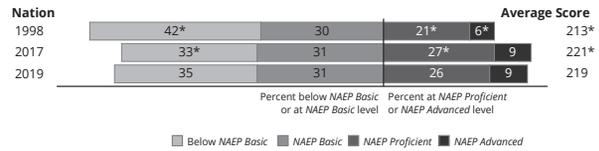


**2019 Reading State Snapshot Report**  
Nation ■ Grade 4 ■ Public Schools

**Overall Results**

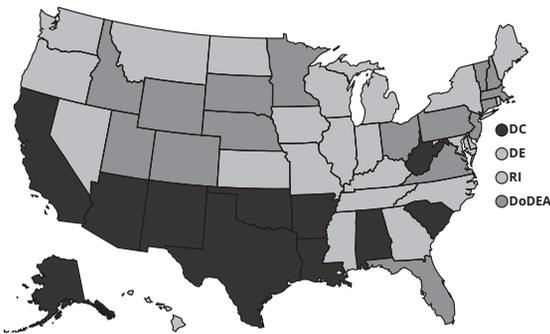
- The average score for students in the nation in 2019 (219) was lower than their average score in 2017 (221) and was higher than their average score in 1998 (213).
- The percentage of students in the nation who performed at or above the *NAEP Proficient* level was 34 percent in 2019. This percentage was lower than that in 2017 (35 percent) and was higher than that in 1998 (28 percent).
- The percentage of students in the nation who performed at or above the *NAEP Basic* level was 65 percent in 2019. This percentage was lower than that in 2017 (67 percent) and was higher than that in 1998 (58 percent).

**NAEP Achievement-Level Percentages and Average Score Results**



\* Significantly different ( $p < .05$ ) from nation's results in 2019. Significance tests were performed using unrounded numbers.  
NOTE: NAEP achievement levels are to be used on a trial basis and should be interpreted and used with caution. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

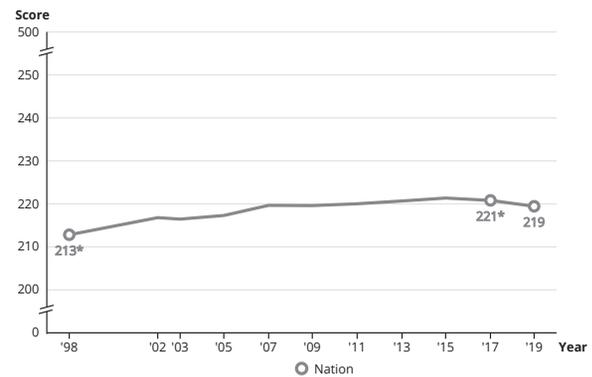
**Compare the Average Score in 2019 to Other States/ Jurisdictions**



In 2019, the average score in the nation (219) was  
 ■ lower than those in 17 states/jurisdictions  
 ■ higher than those in 12 states/jurisdictions  
 ■ not significantly different from those in 23 states/jurisdictions

DoDEA = Department of Defense Education Activity (overseas and domestic schools)

**Average Scores for Nation**



\* Significantly different ( $p < .05$ ) from 2019. Significance tests were performed using unrounded numbers.

**Results for Student Groups in 2019**

Reporting Groups	Percentage of students	Avg. score	Percentage at or above NAEP Basic	Percentage at or above NAEP Proficient	Percentage at NAEP Advanced
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>					
White	46	229	76	44	12
Black	15	203	47	18	3
Hispanic	28	208	54	23	4
Asian	5	239	82	57	22
American Indian/Alaska Native	1	204	50	20	3
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	#	209	55	24	4
Two or more races	4	225	72	40	11
<b>Gender</b>					
Male	51	216	62	31	7
Female	49	223	69	37	10
<b>National School Lunch Program</b>					
Eligible	54	207	52	21	3
Not eligible	45	235	81	50	15

# Rounds to zero.  
NOTE: Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding, and because the "Information not available" category for the National School Lunch Program, which provides free/reduced-price lunches, is not displayed. Black includes African American and Hispanic includes Latino. Race categories exclude Hispanic origin.

**Score Gaps for Student Groups**

- In 2019, Black students had an average score that was 26 points lower than that for White students. This performance gap was narrower than that in 1998 (31 points).
- In 2019, Hispanic students had an average score that was 21 points lower than that for White students. This performance gap was narrower than that in 1998 (31 points).
- In 2019, female students in the nation had an average score that was higher than that for male students by 7 points.
- In 2019, students who were eligible for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), had an average score that was 28 points lower than that for students who were not eligible. This performance gap was not significantly different from that in 1998 (30 points).



NOTE: The NAEP reading scale ranges from 0 to 500. Results presented in this report are based on public school students only. Statistical comparisons are calculated on the basis of unrounded scale score or percentages. Score gap results for "White," "Black," and "Hispanic" presented in this report are based on the 6-category race/ethnicity variable with data available starting in early 1990s. Read more about how to interpret NAEP results from the reading assessment at [interpret results](#). For more information and additional comparisons please visit the [Nation's Report Card](#) and [NAEP Data Explorer](#). SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), various years, 1998-2019 Reading Assessments.

Figure 1.1. National Assessment of Educational Progress: 2019 Reading State Snapshot Report. (From *National Assessment of Educational Progress: The NAEP reading achievement levels by grade*. [2019]. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>)

MTSS also addresses supporting educators through ongoing sustained professional development. It directly acknowledges the relationship between professional learning and effective implementation of MTSS.

Undoubtedly, these efforts are necessary and prevalent across states. But are they sufficient to identify and address the academic demands of today's society, for students to meet state or Common Core State Standards, or, more important, to attain more than basic levels of literacy? There are some

promising signs for the future. A number of states have or are considering policy changes calling for educational change based on the science of reading. These could potentially influence these initiatives.

## Professional Knowledge and the Science of Reading

“There is a profound disconnection between the science of reading and educational practice.”  
—Seidenberg (2017, p. 9)

These and similar initiatives do acknowledge the importance of educator knowledge and professional development. Yet, how many of us have had access to professional learning opportunities that are based in the science of reading and result in improving student outcomes? The answer is fairly obvious, and this lack of attention is not a result of lack of information. Yet, it is not uncommon for some educators to still believe that learning to read is a natural process or struggling readers just need more time to catch up. Despite the evidence on teaching word recognition, students continue to be taught to use unproven strategies, such as the use of picture clues, first letter sounds, and/or context.

**Recognizing the Disconnect** Since 2000, researchers have answered many of the critical questions related to the acquisition of skilled reading, causes of reading difficulties, early indicators of risk, and evidence-based practices. David Kilpatrick (2015) reminded us that RTI was prompted by studies related to effective instructional practices. Yet, he further indicated “when RTI was translated into a process or framework, the instructional techniques that produced these great results were left behind” (p. 13). Others have suggested that the science of reading will be overlooked until the educational community does more than pay “lip service” to meaningful professional knowledge. It is not sufficient to simply provide access to workshops or trainings; opportunities for extended learning and support for classroom application are critical, which require a commitment to change, including embracing the evidence and allocating resources and time. Although the educational community consistently references and uses the term *evidence based*, practitioners actually know very little about the reading research and how it translates into instruction. The National Research Council decried the fact that

The complex world of education does not rest on a strong research base. In no other field are personal experience and ideology so frequently relied on to make policy choices, and in no other field is the research base so little used. (1999, p. 91)

Has this changed? Many, including Mark Seidenberg, feel that time has had little effect on educational practices related to reading proficiency. Educational leaders, such as Louisa Cook Moats, Catherine Snow, and Anne Cunningham, have consistently spoken out about the critical role of professional knowledge and connections to student outcomes. Emily Hanford (2018), an educational journalist, caught the attention of the public by reporting on the connection between student failure and the fact that teachers do not know or use the science of reading. Creating the foundation for informed literacy environments depends on informed educators who are capable of knowing and using the research to inform educational practices.

**Creating the Infrastructure** Any innovation or change, such as an educational commitment to the science of reading, requires a supportive infrastructure. This has to begin with teacher preparation courses at the university level and certification requirements at the state level. Although there are some efforts in this area, much remains to be done. For example, a review of state level licensing exams related to the science of reading indicated that only 11 states have exams that sufficiently measure this knowledge base for elementary and special education teachers (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2018). Understanding the science of reading and its relationship to practice is foundational to the development of curricula and the content of teacher certification exams. The International Dyslexia Association’s (IDA; 2018) Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading are an important source of information for these efforts. The standards “explicitly set forth the knowledge and skills that all teachers of reading are expected to possess to advance students’ reading and writing profiles from a Structured Literacy approach in classroom, remedial, and clinical settings” (p. 5). In other words, they identify what educators need to know and how to translate that knowledge into practice. IDA is currently using these standards to recognize individual and organizational expertise that reflects the science of reading through certification and accreditation initiatives.

Finally, preparatory and professional development systems bear responsibility for providing educators with the necessary knowledge and skills. There has been some progress in the inclusion reading science in teacher preparation programs (NCTQ, 2020). However, the educational community has an ongoing responsibility to bring the science of reading to educational decision-making processes, including theoretical models, an understanding of language systems, and evidence-informed instructional approaches and practices. What educators know matters!

Effective instruction depends on experience and explicit knowledge. Louisa Cook Moats (1999) pointed out, “While experience can be invaluable, in and by itself, it does not provide necessary insights into the development of proficient reading. Teachers cannot rely on their implicit understanding alone to teach reading; explicit teaching requires explicit understanding” (p. 5). Decisions regarding curriculum, instructional approaches, programs, and resources are critical and must be informed by more than experience, observation, or even belief systems. If we are to succeed in implementing effective practices, then we will need to embrace learning as a part of our work as much as teaching itself. The implementation of positive and productive changes will also require purposeful supportive opportunities to learn, share, and apply knowledge. Although the content of this and subsequent chapters is intended to inform, it should be just one of many professional learning opportunities—a starting point that initiates additional learning, collaborative professional dialogue, and application focused on creating informed literacy environments.

## REFLECT & CONNECT!

- How do you measure reading proficiency in your setting? How well do your students perform?
- In what ways has either RTI or MTSS influenced reading instruction in your setting?
- Do you agree with Mark Seidenberg’s statement? Why or why not?

## BUILDING CRITICAL KNOWLEDGE: PROFICIENT READING

The following sections summarize theoretical models of reading that have emerged from the research literature. Understanding these models can help educators identify the factors involved in proficient reading—factors examined further in the reading comprehension discussion.

### The Simple View

The Simple View of Reading is a widely supported theoretical model that provides insights into the acquisition of skilled or proficient reading. This and other models explain how critical processes and skills contribute to the development of reading and, at the same time, suggest instructional direction. By identifying those factors that are central to the reading process, these models have the potential to inform instructional decision making. For example, the Simple View of Reading proposes that reading comprehension, a proxy for skilled reading, is the product of two factors—decoding or efficient word recognition and language or linguistic comprehension.

Decoding (D) × Language comprehension (C) = Reading comprehension (R)  
(Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990)

*Decoding* or *word recognition* refers to the ability to read printed words without the aid of context, whereas *linguistic* or *language comprehension* references the ability to understand language. To comprehend the text, the reader needs to decode the words on the page and then make meaning of the words, sentences, and overall text. This model has been purposefully expressed as a numerical formula requiring both factors. As such, values can be assigned to each factor to illustrate the contribution and necessity for both. For example, mastery in either area can be assigned an absolute value of 1 or 0. We can then do the math:  $1 \times 0 = 0$  or  $0 \times 1 = 0$ . Consider how the Simple View can inform our understanding of reading performance in two of the students introduced earlier, Jermaine and Matt.

What does the research tell us about the acquisition of proficient reading?

Jermaine, a third-grade student, and his classmates are reading about Rosa Parks (Jazyńska, 2015). Jermaine’s listening comprehension skills are strong, but he still struggles with word recognition. He is unable to read the selected grade-appropriate texts independently. He listens as his teacher and/or assistive technology reads to him while simultaneously receiving additional instruction and supports focused on developing automatic word recognition skills. In the traditional sense, Jermaine has not yet attained reading proficiency. His lack of word recognition at this point in time does not allow for him to attend to the meaning of the text.

Meanwhile, fifth-grader Matt struggles as he reads *Tuck Everlasting* (Babbitt, 1975). He has been identified as a student with language difficulties, and although he can read this and any other grade-level text, his understanding of the words, sentence, and overall text is problematic. He sounds like a skilled reader but is not.

Of course, students possess varied levels of skill, but anything less than an absolute value such as 1 (e.g., decimal) represents degrees of difficulty in either area. Although these factors are separable, both are necessary for reading proficiency, and mastery in one is insufficient without the other (Hoover & Gough, 1990). The Simple View explicitly defines the two major contributors to reading comprehension, provides insight into possible sources of difficulty acquiring reading skill, and, in fact, has been found to have predictive value.

Our experiences, however, tell us that the Simple View is not all that simple. Gough and Tunmer’s (1986) model does not deny the complexity of reading but holds that these complexities “could be divided into two parts” (p. 127). We know that word recognition and language comprehension depend on a number of processes and skills. Decades of research have demonstrated that the ability to read words accurately and automatically depends on factors such as phonological awareness, orthographic awareness and knowledge, and morphological awareness and knowledge, as well as rapid automatized naming. (Each of these is defined and explained in the “Language and Literacy” section in this chapter.) According to the Simple View of Reading, linguistic comprehension is a broad construct that involves multiple language and cognitive processes that support “the ability to take lexical (i.e., word) information and derive sentence and discourse interpretations” (Tunmer & Chapman, 2012, p. 455).

## The Reading Rope

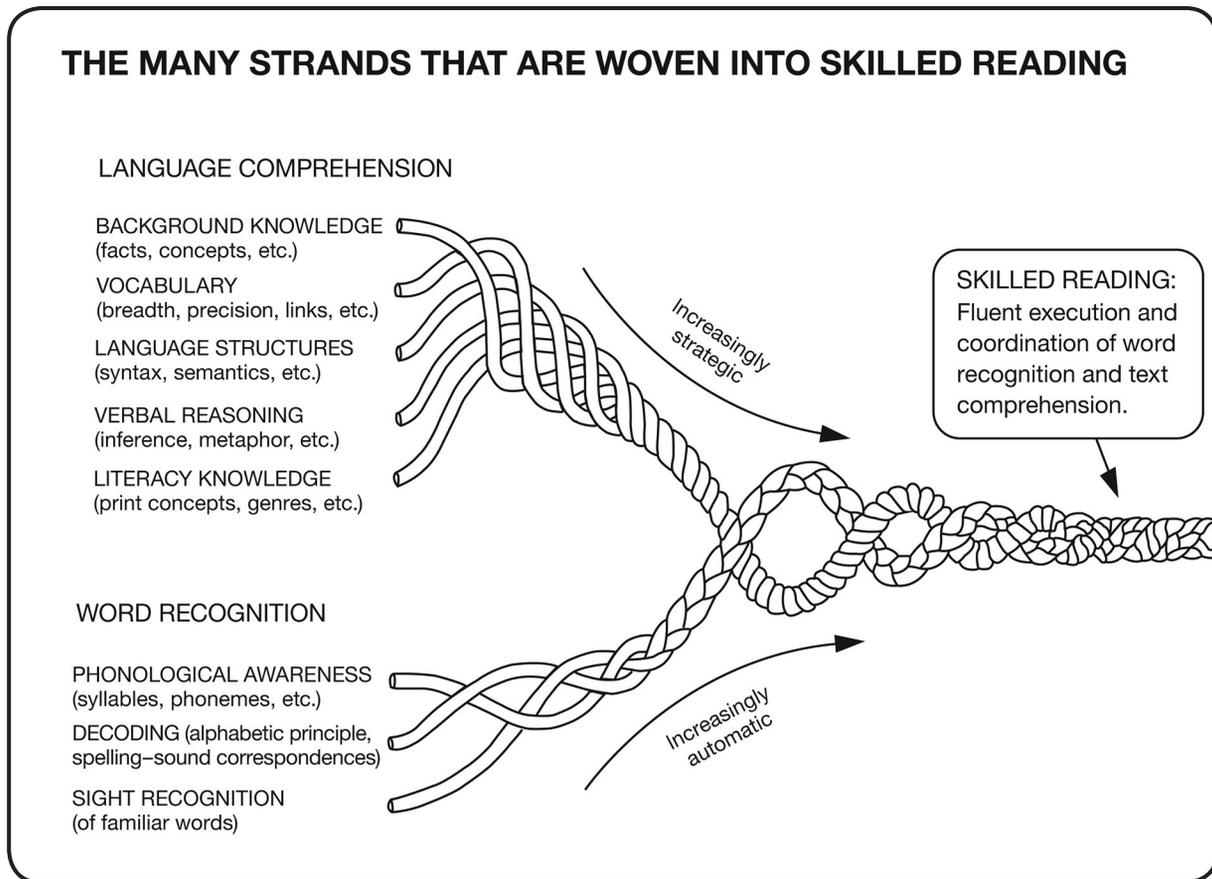
We can deepen our understanding by considering the work of Hollis Scarborough, a noted literacy expert and creator of the Reading Rope (see Figure 1.2). She used a rope to illustrate the development of skilled reading and created a research-based analogy that expands on the Simple View and provides a window into understanding the complexity of skilled reading. The individual strands of the rope represent the contributing competencies necessary for word recognition and language comprehension while conveying the interrelationships that develop over time through instruction and experience.

Scarborough defines *skilled reading* as the fluent execution and coordination of word recognition and text comprehension, both essential factors in reading proficiency. Accurate and automatic word reading depends on three independent yet interrelated skills that translate into instructional components of effective reading instruction (see Table 1.1).

Similarly, the language comprehension strands are necessary for extracting and constructing meaning from text; these strands work in concert with each other and also translate into instructional foci (see Table 1.2). These strands of the Reading Rope are the foundation for a blueprint for reading comprehension instruction that will guide discussion in subsequent chapters.

**Table 1.1.** Instructional connections: Word recognition

Word recognition strands	Connections to instructional components
Phonological awareness	Phonological awareness, phonemic awareness
Decoding	Alphabet, alphabetic principle, basic and advanced phonics
Sight word recognition	Fluency



**Figure 1.2.** The many strands that are woven into skilled reading. (Republished with permission of Guilford Publications, Inc., from *Connecting Early Language and Literacy to Later Reading (Dis)abilities: Evidence, Theory, and Practice*, by H.S. Scarborough, in *Handbook of Early Literacy Research*, vol. 1 [p. 98], S. B. Neuman & D. K. Dickinson [Eds.], copyright Guilford Press, 2001; permission conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.)

Even a quick glance reveals that all of the strands of the rope are necessary and must be tightly woven or braided together. What happens when an individual strand in either area is frayed or not fully developed? Skilled reading, as well as the student’s development of related skills, is obviously in jeopardy. The rope illustration is a powerful visual that is readily understood by practitioners and parents. It contributes to our understanding of the complexity of proficient reading while offering insight into potential sources of difficulty.

## Language and Literacy

Although the focus is primarily on the language comprehension strands of the rope, understanding the contributions of language systems to reading proficiency is essential to overall understanding. Snow, Griffin, and Burns (2006) explained, “Literacy is a secondary system, dependent on language as the primary system, so effective teachers know a good deal about language” (p. 17).

Numerous literacy experts have spoken to the critical role of language in acquiring reading proficiency. The literature on reading acquisition consistently reminds us that skilled reading is a language-based ability, and those with a history of oral language difficulties are at risk of experiencing reading difficulties. *Developing Early Literacy: The Report of the National Early Literacy Panel* (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008) identifies oral language, which is the ability to produce and comprehend spoken language, as one of the

What is the role of language in literacy acquisition?

**Table 1.2.** Instructional connections: Language comprehension

Language comprehension strands	Connections to instructional components
Background knowledge	Background knowledge
Vocabulary	Vocabulary
Language structures	Sentence comprehension
Verbal reasoning	Levels of understanding (e.g., inference)
Literacy knowledge	Print awareness, text structures

early predictors of literacy achievement. Language is a complex, multidimensional yet interrelated system: “Young children need writing to help them learn about reading, they need reading to help them learn about writing; and they need oral language to help them learn about both” (Roskos, Christie, & Richgels, 2003, p. 54).

The importance of teacher knowledge, including an understanding of language systems, is critical and has been emphasized in works related to teacher preparation such as *Knowledge to Support the Teaching of Reading: Preparing Teachers for a Changing World* (Snow et al., 2006). Catherine Snow and colleagues remind us that professional development models for teachers of reading should attend to

- Contributions and instructional implications of language systems
- The connections to component skills/abilities
- The complexity of skilled reading

The IDA’s (2018) Knowledge and Practice Standards also call for all teachers of reading to understand the language processing requirements of proficient reading.

Learning how written language maps onto spoken language is a major challenge for beginning readers. Most educators are more familiar with written language instruction (reading and writing). Thus, a discussion of language systems can heighten awareness and understanding of contributions and connections to reading proficiency.

## Check Your Understanding

Let’s begin by checking your understanding of language systems related to reading proficiency (see Figure 1.3). Think about and rate your level of understanding for the linguistic terms listed.

Rating	Systems
1. Clueless: no understanding	
2. Somewhat clued in: some understanding	
3. Totally clued in: deep understanding	
	Phonology
	Morphology
	Semantics
	Syntax
	Pragmatics
	Discourse
	Orthography*

**Figure 1.3.** Knowledge of language systems.

## Responses

Now, review these brief definitions and check or reassess ratings, if necessary:

1. Phonology: Sounds of our language and rules that govern how sounds are combined.
2. Morphology: Internal structure of meaningful units, word formation patterns within words.
3. Semantics: Knowledge of word meanings, phrases, and sentences and their relationships.
4. Syntax: Order and organization of words, phrases, and clauses to convey meaning through different types of sentences.
5. Pragmatics: Set of rules that govern use of language for communication and conversation in varied social contexts.
6. Discourse: Units of language larger than a single sentence.
7. Orthography: Print or written language system\*.

All of these terms can be represented in spoken and written language except orthography. An understanding of these terms is necessary to recognize connections between language systems and literacy.

Table 1.3 further provides insights into each system, its potential connections to instructional components, and examples of what students are expected to know and do within each.

Understanding the context and varied contributors to skilled reading is a prerequisite for further conversations about the development of language and cognitive processes and skills necessary for meeting the demands of the current standards. Students such as Lily and Jermaine are expected to determine what the text says, how the text works, and how the text relates to others. Close reading is considered a vehicle for accomplishing these goals. Students who read closely work to uncover layers of meaning that lead to deep comprehension. They have to work with layers of language represented in the text, including semantics, syntax, pragmatics, and discourse. Each student will have to use multiple language and cognitive processes and skills to make sense of the exact words and syntax used by the author to integrate idea units, incorporate background knowledge, make inferences, and monitor comprehension. These are all necessary to construct a deep understanding of the text. The remaining chapters dig more deeply into these comprehension processes and skills and their connections to instruction.

**Table 1.3.** Language–literacy connections

System	Components of instruction	Instructional examples
<i>Phonology</i>	<i>Word recognition</i>	
The language skills that most reliably distinguish groups of good and poor readers are specific to phonological or speech sound processing systems (Moats, 2020).	Phonological awareness Phonics	How many sounds are in this word? Blend the sounds within this word.
<i>Morphology</i>	<i>Word recognition</i>	
Supports reading, spelling, and vocabulary (prefixes, base words, roots, suffixes).	Advanced phonics/word study	Do you recognize the parts in this word that carry meaning—can you use these chunks to read this unfamiliar word?
Morphological knowledge contributes not only to improved word recognition but also to reading comprehension by helping readers understand the meanings or syntactic roles of unknown words (Carlisle, 2003).	<i>Language comprehension</i> Vocabulary	Do you know the meaning of the root and prefix within this word? Can you infer its meaning?
	<i>Written expression</i> Word choice	Can you use a more precise word to express your meaning?

**Table 1.3.** (continued)

System	Components of instruction	Instructional examples
<i>Orthography</i>	<i>Word recognition</i>	
The science of spelling by eye instead of ear.	Alphabetic principle Phonics	What is the sound of this letter in this word? What letters are typically used to spell ____?
	<i>Written expression</i> Spelling	Check your spelling of ____?
<i>Semantics</i>	<i>Comprehension</i>	
Making meaning depends on the ability to work with the words and their meaning at the word and sentence level (Oakhill, Cain, & Elbro, 2015).	Vocabulary	Do you know the meaning of this word? Why did the author choose this word? Which words stand out in this passage?
	<i>Written expression</i> Word choice	What word best expresses your meaning?
<i>Syntax</i>	<i>Comprehension</i>	
One by one the sentences add up to the meaning of the text (Scott & Balthazar, 2013).	Sentence comprehension	Can you find the evidence in this sentence? What is happening in this sentence? What words does the author use to connect ideas within and between these sentences? Why did the author use this type of sentence?
	<i>Written expression</i> Sentence construction	Does this sentence choice convey your meaning?
<i>Pragmatics</i>	<i>Comprehension</i>	
Knowing when to use words or expressions for specific purposes orally and in writing is necessary for expressing meaning.	Punctuation Dialogue	What does that punctuation mark tell you about ____? What one word conveys the tone of the author?
	<i>Written expression</i> Audience/purpose	Is the tone formal or informal?
<i>Discourse</i>	<i>Comprehension</i>	
Declarative knowledge for reading includes knowledge of discourse structures or the superstructure organization of different genres (Westby, 2014).	Text structures	Why did the author choose this paragraph type? What is the problem in this story? What is being compared? How is the organization of this text different than ____?
	<i>Written expression</i> Text structures	What paragraph type will be best to accomplish your purpose?

## REFLECT & CONNECT!

- What insights have you gained about the nature of proficient reading?
- Why is an understanding of language important to literacy instruction?
- What connections have you made to your practice?

## SUMMARY: CRITICAL KNOWLEDGE FOR EDUCATORS

This chapter focused on surfacing and building educators' critical background knowledge for working with concepts and ideas related to the complexities of reading comprehension. The current educational context, including current student performance, educational initiatives, and professional knowledge, provides a backdrop for understanding the importance of creating informed literacy environments. Building the infrastructure necessary for effective instruction demands knowledge

of the critical contributors to skilled reading, including an understanding of theoretical models that inform comprehension instruction. The role of language and its connections to literacy is particularly important.

## REFLECT & CONNECT!

- Which of these discussions was more relevant to you? Why?
  - The educational context
  - Proficient reading
- What insights have you gained about the nature of proficient reading?
- Why is an understanding of language important to literacy instructions?
- What connections have you made to your practice?

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#### EDUCATORS WILL

- **Get critical background knowledge.** Synthesizing decades of research on reading comprehension, this book provides educators with all the fundamentals that they need to teach this key component of reading proficiency.
- **Master the blueprint.** Teachers will get a complete framework for organizing instruction, aligned with the language comprehension strands of Scarborough's Reading Rope. In-depth chapters are devoted to each facet of reading comprehension, including vocabulary, syntax and sentence comprehension, text structures, background knowledge, and levels of understanding and inference.
- **Make it work in the classroom.** Educators will find practical guidance and tools for planning their lessons, adapting to the needs of individual students, and assessing student progress.

Aligned with the science of reading and IDA's Structured Literacy approach, this book will give teachers the essential knowledge and practical tools that they need to help every student become a proficient reader—and build a strong foundation for school success.

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