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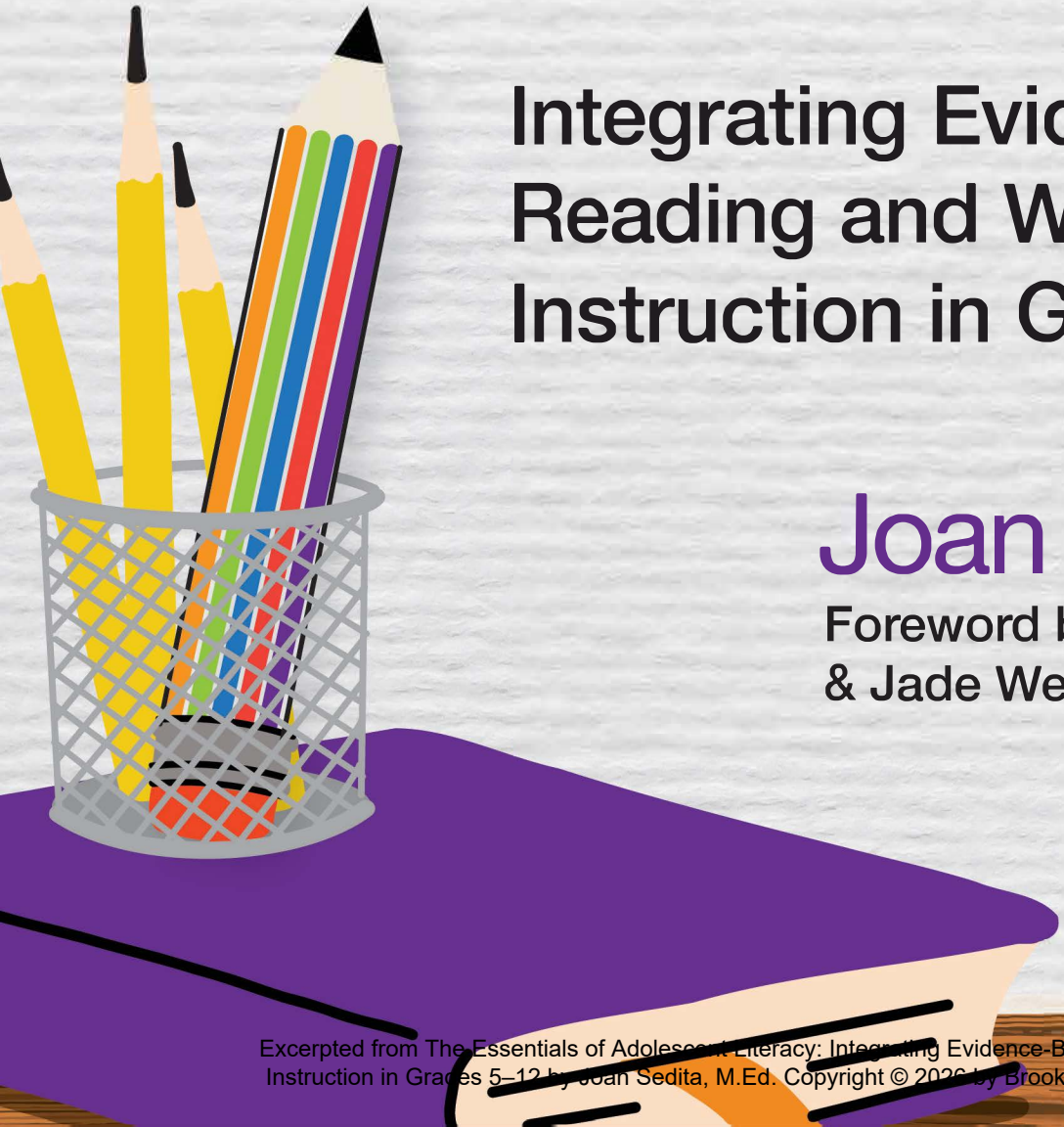
THE ESSENTIALS OF Adolescent Literacy

Integrating Evidence-Based Reading and Writing Instruction in Grades 5–12



Joan Sedita

Foreword by Sharon Vaughn & Jade Wexler

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The Essentials of Adolescent Literacy

Integrating Evidence-Based Reading and Writing Instruction in Grades 5–12

by

Joan Sedita, M.Ed.

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About the Author

Joan Sedita, M.Ed., has been in the literacy education field for more than 45 years. She began her career at the Landmark School in Massachusetts for students with reading and learning disabilities, where she worked from 1975 to 1998 as a teacher and administrator. Joan was Founder and Director of the Landmark College Preparation Program and the Landmark Outreach Training Program. While at the Landmark School, she also was a member of a team that conducted psychoeducational evaluations at Boston Children's Hospital. From 1998 to 2007, as Founder of Sedita Learning Strategies, Joan trained educators and consulted with schools and literacy organizations throughout the country. During this time, she was Lead Developer and Trainer for the Massachusetts Reading First initiative and Consultant to the state's Secondary Reading initiative. Joan also was a national author and trainer for *LETRS: Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling,* published by Voyager Sopris Learning. She was a member of the Educational Testing Service Praxis National Reading Advisory Committee and a board member of Learning Disabilities Worldwide.

In 2007, Joan founded Keys to Literacy, a literacy professional learning company that develops, publishes, and delivers reading and writing professional development to educators across the country, as well as literacy planning and consulting services to districts and state departments of education. She continues to consult with school districts and state departments of education, presents at national and state literacy conferences, and develops content for literacy trainings, books, and online courses.

Joan developed *The Writing Rope®* framework in 2018 and has authored numerous books, book chapters, and articles related to literacy instruction. Her earlier books include *The Landmark Study Skills Guide* (1989), *Writing: A Road to Reading Comprehension* (2004), and three guides for the Kurzweil text-to-speech software to support reading and study skills: *Kurzweil 3000 Study Skills Guide* (1999), *Active Learning and Study Strategies* (2003), and *Guide to Effective Vocabulary Instruction* (2004). In 2022, Joan authored *The Writing Rope: A Framework for Explicit Writing Instruction in All Subjects* (Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.). She has authored multiple professional development programs that include books, online courses, and training materials, including these titles published by Keys to Literacy: *Keys to Beginning Reading, Keys to Adolescent Literacy, The Key Comprehension Routine, The Key Vocabulary Routine, Keys to Content Writing,* and *Keys to Early Writing.*

Joan received her B.A. from Boston College and her M.Ed. in reading from Harvard University.

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Foreword

In an ever-evolving world, literacy stands as a cornerstone of personal and academic success, particularly during the critical adolescent years. For example, the inability to read and gain meaning from text can have negative effects on students' course performance and, in turn, their ability to earn credits and graduate. Students who lack reading and writing proficiency by fourth grade are more likely than their proficient peers to drop out before completing high school. These consequences are correlated with negative outcomes in adulthood, including lower earnings and higher rates of physical and mental health problems. Thus, it is critical that we continue to address literacy as a high priority issue, even as students reach the secondary grades. However, it is important to recognize that the transition from childhood to adolescence is marked by profound changes, not just physically and emotionally, but also in the way young individuals engage with text and develop their literacy skills. Reaching our shared goal of literacy success for all adolescents is not an easy endeavor, but books like this one can help. *The Essentials of Adolescent Literacy* serves as a vital resource for educators, parents, and policymakers dedicated to fostering a culture of literacy that meets the diverse needs of adolescents. While educators and parents have many research-based resources to guide decision-making, there are few that provide the science of reading for students after Grade 4.

This book is rooted in the understanding that literacy is not merely about reading and writing; it encompasses critical thinking, comprehension, and the ability to communicate effectively across various platforms. Adolescents face unique challenges, including varying levels of motivation, engagement, and access to resources. As such, it is imperative that we equip them with the tools and strategies necessary to navigate these challenges and thrive in their academic journeys.

The insights and strategies presented in this book are drawn from extensive research and best practices in the field of literacy education providing a comprehensive framework that addresses the complexities of adolescent literacy. It is common for books at the secondary level to focus on reading *or* writing, despite our knowledge that reading and writing go hand in hand. Therefore, something that sets *The Essentials of Adolescent Literacy* apart is the emphasis throughout on the integration of reading and writing. Furthermore, you might hear people use the terms content-area and disciplinary literacy. What do these terms mean? What is the difference? This book addresses this issue with a review of content-area and disciplinary literacy, and the critical need to integrate content-area literacy into content-area instruction. This is crucial considering *all* students spend a majority of their instructional day in the content-area setting (e.g., science, history), including students with reading difficulties and disabilities. Accordingly, the book provides information on how to support adolescents with literacy difficulties in the general education classroom and how to provide data-driven reading intervention for students who require this type of support. Chapters emphasize the importance of culturally responsive teaching and provide essential information about understanding adolescent literacy within a framework of the significant role of motivation and engagement, including the integration of how collaborative grouping structures promote both engagement and shared learning. Recognizing that educators are increasingly aware of the powerful use of technology to meet the needs of adolescent learners, chapters also emphasize the importance of technology in the classroom. All of these features and more are represented in this book.

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The Essentials of Adolescent Literacy serves as an essential, practical guide for fostering a robust literacy environment that not only enhances academic achievement but also empowers adolescents to become lifelong learners and informed citizens. With this book by our side, we are able to commit to nurturing the literacy skills of our youth, ensuring that they are well equipped to face the future with confidence and competence.

Sharon Vaughn, Ph.D., and Jade Wexler, Ph.D.

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Acknowledgments

I began my career in education in 1975 as a summer tutor for teenagers with dyslexia and reading disabilities at the Landmark School in Massachusetts. One of my first students was Julie, a bright 14-year-old who could comprehend complex texts when they were read aloud but struggled to decode written words. She also had difficulty writing complete sentences. After 6 weeks of tutoring Julie for 2 hours each day, using explicit instruction to teach foundational reading and writing skills, her reading level improved from third to fifth grade. She was finally able to read books on her own and navigate practical texts such as restaurant menus and bus schedules. She even wrote a letter to her parents. Most important, after years of being told she would never learn to read, Julie's confidence soared. That experience sparked my lifelong passion for teaching literacy.

Over the decades I've spent in the literacy field, I have worked with students and the teachers who support them, kept up with evolving research, and developed teacher training courses for all grade levels. But my greatest passion remains helping adolescent learners—especially those who struggle with reading and writing.

This book represents the culmination of a 5-decade journey to improve literacy for all students, with a particular focus on those in Grades 5 through 12. I am deeply grateful to the many adolescent learners I had the privilege to teach—students who played a vital role in helping me develop effective approaches to teaching reading and writing instruction. I also extend my thanks to the thousands of educators who have offered insightful feedback on the professional development courses and books I have authored. My appreciation goes as well to the dedicated literacy consultants at Keys to Literacy, who have generously shared their expertise and insights since I founded the organization in 2007. Most of all, I am especially thankful to my husband, Joe DelGuidice, who introduced me to both teaching and Landmark School—an introduction that shaped the course of my professional life.

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Introduction

Literacy skills are essential for success in school, in postsecondary education, in the workforce, and to communicate with others in our personal lives. However, many students leave the elementary grades without grade-level reading and writing skills. And there is no guarantee that those who have these skills will continue to develop the more challenging content and disciplinary literacy skills needed to read, write, and participate in discussion to learn in all subjects in middle and high school.

Furthermore, although significant school district and statewide initiatives were launched between 2015 and 2025 to address student literacy achievement, most of these initiatives have focused on beginning reading instruction in the elementary grades. Whereas there is a significant research base about effective literacy instruction for adolescents, including writing, minimal federal, state, and local initiatives have focused on Grades 5–12 in terms of funding, legislation, pre-service adolescent literacy courses in universities, and district- or school-based professional development.

This book was written for educators of students in Grades 5–12, including content teachers, intervention educators, and administrators who seek to provide effective literacy instruction in content classrooms as well as intervention settings. It includes evidence-based instructional suggestions for teaching vocabulary, comprehension, text structure, writing, discussion skills, and advanced word study to read unfamiliar multisyllabic words often encountered in different subject areas.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The content of this book is organized as follows.

Section I: Introduction to Adolescent Literacy

This section provides background knowledge about how students acquire literacy skills across all grades and how adolescent literacy instruction for Grades 5–12 is different from elementary literacy instruction.

Chapter 1, "Literacy Basics," explains the Science of Reading and literacy frameworks including the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986), the Reading Rope (Scarborough, 2001), and The Writing Rope® (Sedita, 2019). The five components of reading are summarized, along with how the emphasis for teaching these components shifts as students move into Grade 5. Language components, principles of effective literacy instruction, and the importance of integrating reading and writing instruction for all grades are included.

Chapter 2, "What Is Adolescent Literacy?" explains why all teachers need to play a role in providing reading and writing instruction because literacy is the gatekeeper to learning in any subject. Research about effective adolescent literacy instruction is introduced, and the difference between content literacy and disciplinary literacy is explained along with the important role content teachers play.

Section II: Literacy Instruction

This section provides practical, evidence-based suggestions for teaching literacy skills in all subjects. The chapters are organized by literacy topics as follows.

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Chapter 3, "Vocabulary Instruction," explains the role of academic vocabulary in reading comprehension and content learning and offers suggestions for previewing unfamiliar words, selecting and teaching targeted words in depth, planning activities to make connections among words, using text context and knowledge of word parts to determine word meanings, and fostering word consciousness.

Chapter 4, "Comprehension Instruction," describes factors that contribute to reading comprehension and instructional suggestions for text analysis and close reading, metacognition, and inferencing. Suggestions for teaching comprehension strategies are also offered, including using Top-Down Topic Webs and Two-Column Note graphic organizers, summarizing, and generating and answering questions.

Chapter 5, "Teaching Text Structure," explains the role that awareness of text structure plays in supporting reading comprehension and writing. Instructional suggestions are provided for several levels of text structure, including the three types of text (informational, argument, narrative), paragraph structure, patterns of organization, transition words and phrases, and complex sentences.

Chapter 6, "Writing Instruction," highlights the shift from learning to write in elementary grades to using writing to learn in Grades 5–12. The multiple writing skills and strategies needed for proficient writing are presented as part of The Writing Rope framework. The role of content teachers in developing student writing ability is stressed, and suggestions for using quick writes and responses to writing prompts based on content texts are offered. Suggestions for strategies to teach students that support the stages of the writing process (*Think, Plan, Write, Revise*) are also offered.

Chapter 7, "Supporting Learning Through Discussion," highlights the value of using discussion to support text comprehension and content learning. Suggestions for planning and facilitating different discussion formats are provided, including teacher and student "moves" that are part of the Accountable Talk framework.

Chapter 8, "Advanced Word Study and Fluency," provides an overview of phonics instruction and the advanced word study skills older students need to read and spell academic, multisyllabic words. Fluency is defined along with an explanation of how a lack of fluency contributes to reading difficulty for some older students.

Section III: Supporting Adolescents With Literacy Difficulties

This section focuses on supporting adolescents who have difficulty with literacy skills.

Chapter 9, "Adolescent Learners With Literacy Difficulties," explains the multiple reasons why some students struggle with reading and writing, including dyslexia and executive function deficits, and discusses how intervention needs to be based on individual student needs. The needs of older English learners related to developing literacy skills are addressed. Suggestions for evidence-based intervention instruction are provided that address writing, vocabulary, comprehension, phonics, and fluency as part of an MTSS (multi-tiered system of support) framework.

Chapter 10, "Data-Driven Reading Intervention," highlights the important role that assessment plays in informing intervention instruction decisions. The four types of assessment are explained (screening, diagnostic, progress monitoring, summative) and a secondary instruction model and secondary reading assessment plan are introduced. Suggestions for analyzing assessment data are also offered.

Questions for reflection are included at the end of each chapter, and an end-of-book piece titled, "Integrating Literacy Instruction in All Subjects," is designed to help content teachers incorporate the instructional practices into content teaching. In addition, many reproducible student and teacher resources included throughout the chapters may also be accessed through the Brookes Download Hub.

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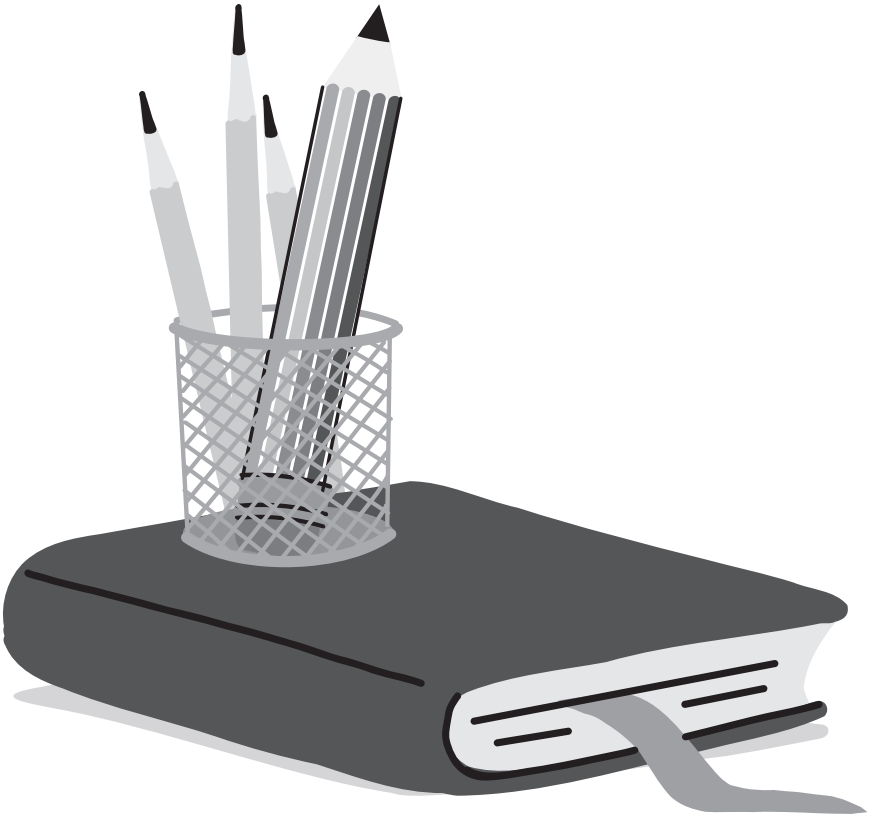
I

Introduction to Adolescent Literacy



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1

Literacy Basics

It is important for educators who work with adolescent learners to understand how reading and writing ability develops across elementary and secondary grades. This chapter provides an overview of seminal research in literacy and the Science of Reading and how it can be used to better understand the instructional needs of both proficient readers and those who have weaknesses. Components of reading and language are introduced and explained, as well as general principles for effective instruction.

THE SCIENCE OF READING

The Science of Reading (SOR) refers to a comprehensive body of scientific knowledge and research from the fields of education, cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, and neuroscience that explains how individuals learn how to read and what are the best practices for reading instruction (Petscher et al., 2020; Seidenberg et al., 2020; The Reading League, n.d.). Research related to writing is also addressed in SOR. This research has been conducted over the last five decades across the world, and it is derived from thousands of studies conducted in multiple languages. Educators should keep in mind that SOR is not a curriculum, program, or a single component of literacy instruction such as phonics or comprehension.

Several frameworks that contribute to the understanding of the competencies and skills students need to develop to be proficient readers and writers are shared below: the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986), the Reading Rope (Scarborough, 2001), The Writing Rope (Sedita, 2019), and the five components of literacy instruction identified by the National Reading Panel (2000).

The Simple View of Reading

The Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986), shown in Figure 1.1, proposes that reading comprehension cannot occur unless students are proficient with both word recognition skills and language comprehension. Automatic word recognition, also described as decoding, leads to fluent reading. Language comprehension includes having sufficient vocabulary knowledge and syntactic awareness (an understanding of English grammar) to comprehend while listening. If adolescent learners have not developed sufficient word recognition skills and language processes by Grade 5, they will most likely have difficulty making meaning while reading.

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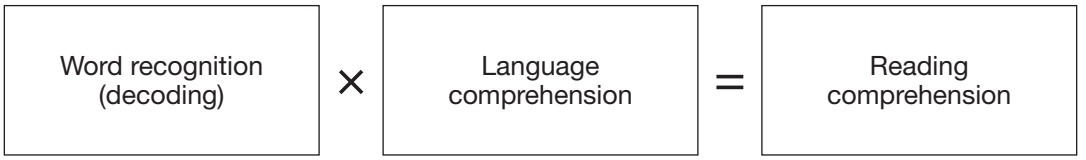

Figure 1.1. The Simple View of Reading. (Gough, P. B., & Tunmer, W. E. , Decoding, reading, and reading disability. *Remedial and Special Education, 7*[1], 6–10. Copyright © 1986 by Sage Publications. Reprinted by Permission of Sage Publications.)

Note that the Simple View is depicted as a formula where the two sides are not added together to predict reading comprehension. Rather, they are multiplied, with a total score of 1 predicting highly proficient reading comprehension, and a score of 0 meaning no comprehension ability. Each side has a maximum score of 1. Using the formula, if a student has strong word recognition skills (1) and strong language comprehension (1), it can be predicted that the student will have proficient reading comprehension. However, if a student has no word recognition skills (0) and strong language comprehension (1), the total score is 0, and it can be predicted that the student will not comprehend while reading.

Types of Readers: Four Quadrants

Using the Simple View as a framework, students can be grouped into four categories of readers (Cain, 2016; Catts et al., 2006) shown in the four quadrants in Figure 1.2: proficient readers, weak readers, readers with weak word recognition, and readers with weak comprehension.

Proficient Readers These students have strong word recognition and language comprehension. They typically have at or above grade-level reading ability. Content literacy instruction and regular reading of grade-level text are sufficient for these students to maintain proficient reading ability.

Weak Readers These are students who have difficulty with both word recognition and language comprehension. They typically benefit from supplemental instruction in phonics and advanced word study, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

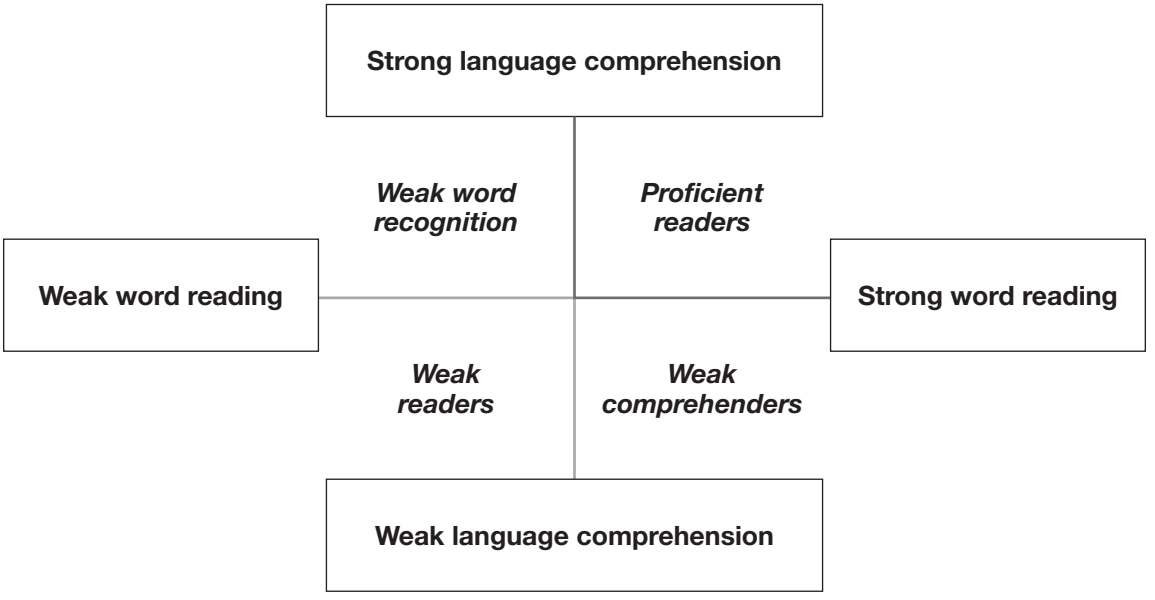

Figure 1.2. Four quadrants showing different categories of readers. (*Sources:* Cain, 2016; Catts et al., 2006.)

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Readers With Weak Word Recognition These students have strong language comprehension but weak word recognition skills. Decoding difficulties interfere with their reading comprehension, which would otherwise be strong. These students benefit from supplemental instruction that focuses on phonics, advanced word study, and fluency. It is common for younger elementary students in this category to become weak readers if they do not receive intervention. Vocabulary and comprehension are affected over time because these students are not regularly reading grade-level text, which provides the exposure to academic vocabulary, complex sentences, and content knowledge that is important for reading in Grade 5 and beyond.

Weak Comprehenders These students have strong word recognition skills but weak language comprehension. They are sometimes called *word callers* because they can decode words but cannot make meaning from the words or sentences. They benefit from supplemental instruction focused on vocabulary and comprehension.

The Reading Rope

Scarborough (2001) developed a model of reading that depicts the multiple skills required to successfully read as strands in a rope. Scarborough's model groups four language comprehension components and three word recognition components into two sections listed below.

- Language Comprehension strands include Background Knowledge (facts, concepts, etc.), Vocabulary (breadth, precision, links, etc.), Language Structures (syntax, semantics, etc.), Verbal Reasoning (inference, metaphor, etc.), and Literacy Knowledge (print concepts, genres, etc.).
- Word Recognition strands include Phonological Awareness (syllables, phonemes, etc.), Decoding (alphabetical principle, spelling-sound correspondences), and Sight Recognition (of familiar words).

These seven components are represented as strands in a rope. As students become increasingly more strategic and automatic with the reading skills associated with these components, these strands become more tightly woven together, leading to proficient, fluent reading. When students have deficits in any of the strands, skilled reading is impeded.

The Writing Rope

The Writing Rope (Sedita, 2019) is an instructional framework for teaching writing across all grades. The framework, shown in Figure 1.3, identifies the following five components of writing skills and strategies that students must learn to become skilled writers, represented as strands in a rope:

- Critical Thinking: Generate ideas; gather information; apply the writing process.
- Syntax: Write sophisticated, elaborated sentences.
- Text Structure: Apply knowledge of paragraph and longer text structures; incorporate patterns of organization and related transitions.
- Writing Craft: Consider the task, audience, and purpose; incorporate writing craft techniques when writing.
- Transcription: Spell and handwrite or keyboard at an automatic level.

During the elementary grades, students must learn a significant number of skills, strategies, and techniques within each of the strands. As they move into Grade 5 and beyond, they integrate these skills to produce writing pieces that effectively convey what they want to communicate, much like weaving together strands in a rope.

A reproducible copy of The Writing Rope is included with the downloadable resources for this chapter. (See About the Downloads in the front of this book for directions on how to access the content on the Brookes Download Hub.)

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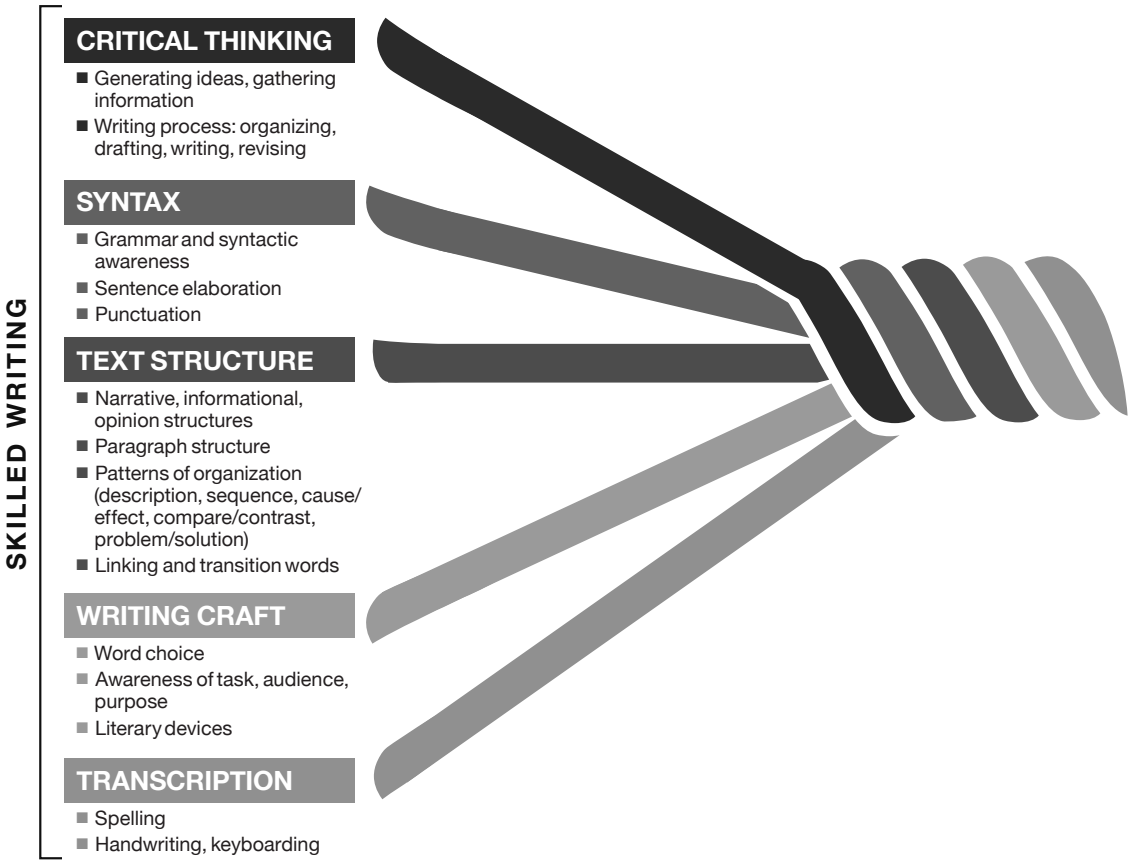

Figure 1.3. The Writing Rope®. *Full-color version available on the Brookes Download Hub*. (From *The Writing Rope®: The strands that are woven into skilled writing* [online article]. Keys to Literacy; reprinted by permission. © 2019 by Joan Sedita. All rights reserved.)

THE FIVE COMPONENTS OF READING

The National Reading Panel (2000) identified five components of reading instruction that are essential to learning to read, described in Figure 1.4. They are sometimes referred to as the five pillars of reading. *Phonemic awareness, phonics,* and *fluency* are associated with word-reading skills. *Vocabulary* and *comprehension* are associated with making meaning when reading.

As students progress from kindergarten through Grade 12, the focus for teaching the reading components changes. Instruction for the foundational skills of phonemic awareness and phonics is emphasized in the early grades, with phonics instruction shifting to advanced word study in Grades 4 and 5 as students learn to read and spell multisyllabic words derived from Latin and Greek. Students continue to develop text reading fluency across all elementary grades, with a benchmark goal of at least 150 words correct per minute (WCPM) after Grade 6. Vocabulary development and the ability to apply comprehension strategies to increasingly complex text should be a focus across all grades. Instruction in Grades 5–12 is organized into content literacy for vocabulary, comprehension, and writing to support learning that is taught in all subjects, and intervention instruction for adolescent struggling readers to fill in gaps they may have in any component of reading.

LANGUAGE COMPONENTS

When students learn a language, they are learning to navigate an existing set of conventions that are shared by other users of the language. There are seven English language components that contribute

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