

## **Reading Information Texts: Aligning to the Common Core Learning Standards**

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The Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) reflect a shift from reading fiction to non-fiction narratives, and thus require students to engage in close reading of information texts and cite evidence from the text. This presentation, given at the NYS TESOL Annual Conference in November, provided teachers with activities for implementing the Grades 9-12 CCLS for reading information texts: Reading Standards 1, 2, and 3—Information Text (Key Ideas and Details). The presenters demonstrated cognitive strategies that lead students in a reading process that extends beyond literal decoding and develops higher order thinking skills, thereby enabling them to analyze the text and thus identify and evaluate an author's thesis and supporting arguments, as well as draw inferences. These practices focus on understanding the logical relationships between ideas, such as cause-effect or comparison-contrast, that drive the text narrative as the author's thesis develops and culminates in a summation.

Such an emphasis is grounded in the literature for text comprehension. According to Kintsch and van Dijk (1978) and Murray (1995), successful comprehension does not result merely from decoding strings of letters into a random series of words or processing lists of thematically disconnected ideas. Haberlandt (1982) posited that text comprehension results when readers' expectations of unfolding content conform to the text's local sentence level coherence as well as to global discourse coherence that conveys ideas throughout the text. Thus, the ability to construct such coherence constitutes an underlying and essential component of text comprehension. Similarly, Sanders and Noordman (2000) asserted that readers construct a coherent meaning and interpretation of ideas conveyed in a text by connecting the information expressed by its various parts. Thus, the need to understand the genre of information texts in general, and logical relationships in particular, bolsters the rationale for teaching transition words and their functions as cognitive tools with which students can interact with a text and construct its various layers of meaning.

Many ELLs lack a conceptual understanding and mental model of information paragraphs and the resulting text, from what information is to how the text develops and conveys information. Such paragraphs consist of a topic sentence that expresses the main idea, followed by supporting facts and examples. These details, however, are not written as a string of random sentences, as students may perceive them to be; indeed, students often confuse the main idea with the supporting details. Therefore, students need to understand that authors present information in one sentence after another in order to compare and contrast, illustrate causes and effects, and so forth, all of which contribute to the main idea of the paragraph, and ultimately the thesis of the text. Thus, students need to construct formal schema for the paragraph development that comprises an information text as well as for underlying logical relationships. To that end, knowledge of transition words and their functions provides a cognitive tool that facilitates close reading and analysis, thereby enabling students to anticipate specific relationships between them, and so distinguish them from the main idea.

Implementation of the instruction of signal words should follow a basic main-idea/details unit. Initial understanding the basic facts of “who,” “what,” “why” is essential to identifying and comprehending the logical relationships that reveal a deeper layer of analysis of these facts. Then, begin teaching one relationship at a time, progressing according to the complexity of cognitive processing entailed by these relationships: example, addition, sequencing, similarity, comparison-contrast, cause-effect. Instruction should also be embedded within the context of a reading that is already planned rather than as an isolated grammar point (e.g., *consequently* signals a result of a preceding situation in the reading). Likewise, extension practice activities progress from easy to complex processing: matching, t-charts, sentence completion, graphic organizers, short paragraphs, and longer passages.

As a culminating activity for a unit on logical relationships, students used signal words to analyze a cloze summary of an information text on the problem of juvenile delinquency. Students were introduced to the topic in a prior lesson with a concept map that brainstormed the issues connected to the issue. For the cloze, students can access a connectors table that organizes the transition words and phrases according to their function in signaling logical relations. Using the term *connector* or *signal* rather than *transition word* is recommended, because students can conceptualize “connect” more easily than “transition.”

After a teacher-led modeling of the first paragraph, which elicits student input, they complete the task independently or in various instructional groupings that also allow for differentiation. The text can be completed as one entire text individually or in pairs or groups. As an alternate, the activity may be completed as a jigsaw so that each paragraph is completed separately by a pair or group of students. High-level students may complete the cloze without reference to a connector table, whereas mid-level students may refer to the table as necessary. Low-level students may have a multiple-choice answer sheet as well as a cloze version that embeds synonymous signal words next to the open blank to be completed. During whole-class review, students provide their answers and explain their choice of connector in terms of the logical relationship expressed between the ideas, and we discuss how they support the topic sentence of the paragraph and the thesis of the text.

Due to the time limit of our session, we were unable to engage the participants in a comprehensive question-and-answer discussion. Based upon participants’ feedback comments, we plan to present this workshop again within a longer session to allow for hands-on participation in the activities, and to present additional handout materials for teachers to take back to their classrooms.

## References

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