Listen and Reading Comprehension at Story Time: How to Build Habits of the Mind

Understanding a story is an active process, whether children have listened to it being read aloud or, when they are older and read it for themselves. When children grasp a story, they

- attend to what is important,
- anticipate what is to come, and
- build meaningful patterns from the many details.

These active interactions with a story can be called *habits of the mind*. They involve both a disposition to engage with a story and the mental skills needed to make sense of its meaning.

Like many dispositions and skills, reading for understanding grows stronger when it is regularly exercised. When used intentionally, story time can build habits of the mind that help young children interact with texts in active and purposeful ways. In particular, story time is a natural context for alerting children to story structure, using graphic organizers, and asking skillful questions. This article will discuss how these three strategies can build in children some habits of the mind needed to understand stories that they hear, and that they will soon read for themselves.

### Important Elements of Story Reading

Story time, a natural context for making meaning, is an important experience for the children who are listening. Comprehension is the heart of reading and listening. Comprehension involves “the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning” (Sweet & Snow, 2003, p. 1).

At story time, the pleasure of a good tale gives children a reason to interact with a text, and that pleasure can then lead them to think about what they are hearing. When children experience a story, they do far more than just understand each word, important as that is. They also build a mental picture of the characters and events, often filling in the logical but unexpressed connections.

Because it puts listeners so intimately in touch with the story, “reading aloud to/with children can begin to develop skills and strategies that lead to comprehension of texts required of competent readers and writers” (Combs, 2006, p. 137). As young children learn to listen to stories with understanding, they practice skills that will also help them to read stories with understanding.
While the research on the effects of reading aloud to children is mixed, teachers are urged to use an interactive approach, noting that in order to get the greatest benefits, “the way books are shared with children matters” (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007, p. 742).

Often research on this topic uses the term interactive shared book reading to describe an engaging approach to read-alouds. In this approach, not only do teachers read the story aloud, often to a small group, but they also use “a variety of techniques to engage the children in the text” (What Works Clearinghouse, 2007). The National Early Literacy Panel also emphasizes the importance of interaction when reading aloud to young children (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010).

At a more theoretical level, the interactive approach to reading aloud exemplifies Vygotsky’s emphasis on the zone of proximal development; in sharing a story this way, the adult scaffolds the children’s experience, leading them to an understanding they could not achieve on their own (Vygotsky, 1978).

Sharing a story interactively can take many forms, including using story structure, graphic organizers, and open-ended questions. Literacy research suggests that teaching story structure is powerful (Adler, 2001). Story structure, also called story grammar, refers to the predictable elements that make up most stories: characters and setting, as well as a plot that involves some sort of problem, and its resolution.

Familiarity with story structure is likely to help build comprehension because it provides children with a mental map they can use to organize all the details of a story that they read or heard (Garner & Bochna, 2004). It is also good practice to provide young children with experiences that are as concrete as possible, something that is especially important when dealing with ideas as abstract as story elements. Graphic organizers are “an effective way to teach concepts and to engage children” (Bredekamp, 2011, p. 282). Graphic organizers that are suitable for young children include story maps, T-charts, and simple timelines.

A teacher’s questions help children build understanding of texts. Answering questions about a story helps make reading and listening more purposeful by focusing children’s attention on the task, and it provides an opportunity to “review the content and relate what they have learned to what they already know” (Adler, 2001, p. 3). In this article, the use of questions, particularly open-ended ones, is embedded in the discussion of story grammar and graphic organizers.

Teaching Strategies

These three strategies for building comprehension—story structure, graphic organizers, and open-ended questions—can be applied to many simple picture books, including Sit, Truman! (Harper, 2001), which is featured here with Mrs. Ortiz, a teacher of 4-year-olds. The book takes readers through a day with...
Truman, a beloved but troublesome pet. The entire story is told through the commands of the faceless and hapless owner as he tries to civilize his enormous dog. Because of his size, this well-intentioned but ill-mannered puppy overpowers the house. Through the exasperated commands of his owner, children learn that Truman drinks from the toilet, steals food, and strains on his leash, all while drooling.

Truman's struggles to fit into the household mirror the struggles of young children as they learn to adapt to adult expectations. Despite all these problems, Truman learns. The illustrations in *Sit, Truman!* show how powerfully pictures can contribute to the meaning of a story, especially for preschoolers (Evans & Saint-Aubin, 2005).

This story works well for teaching story grammar because it draws upon children's knowledge of families and makes it easier for them to visualize the characters and setting and to predict events in the plot. The witty pictures introduce a family, including the owner, a sophisticated and somewhat superior cat, and Oscar, the little dog who never does anything wrong. Children can identify with this cast of characters because they illustrate common family dynamics.

**Introduce New Vocabulary**

Before reading a story, skilled teachers like Mrs. Ortiz usually introduce new vocabulary. For *Sit, Truman!* two words may lend themselves well to direct teaching before reading—the name of the character, Truman, and an adjective for his size, enormous. Mrs. Ortiz introduces the dog's name by showing the book cover and asking children who they think Truman is. Several children are likely to figure out that the word is the name of the dog that fills the cover.

To introduce enormous, Mrs. Ortiz asks children to help her make a list of all of the words they can think of that mean really big. Huge, gigantic, and immense are suggested, as well as enormous. If it had not been mentioned, Mrs. Ortiz adds this word to the list and explains that all of these words mean really big.

In contrast, Mrs. Ortiz handles the word drooling a little differently by using a strategy called “turn and talk” (Pinnell & Fountas, 2011, p. 118). She points to the title page's picture where Truman is obviously drooling and poses an open-ended question such as, “What is Truman doing in this picture? Turn and talk to your neighbor about what you see.” After the children's brief discussions, many of which use terms like slobbering or dribbling, she explains that the book uses another word that means the same thing, drooling.

**Identify Problems and Solutions**

Next, Mrs. Ortiz introduces the ideas of problems and solutions. These concepts and the words that represent them are abstract. As a result, it is often helpful to stage a hypothetical but concrete problem. For example, Mrs. Ortiz might deliberately find a marker with no cap. She could then react to the situation first by saying “Oh, we have a problem!” and then ask the children to name the problem and suggest how it could be solved. By deliberately creating teachable moments like this, teachers promote children's understanding of the words problem and solution, two abstract terms that are essential to grasping the nature of story grammar.

**Focus on Pictures and Make Predictions**

The next strategy is to guide children to notice the book's cover and title. As part of a brief review of the illustrations, or picture walk, probe for prior knowledge about pets and review newly introduced vocabulary.
While holding the book to show the cover page, pause for another turn and talk activity. This time, Mrs. Ortiz asks, “What do you think this story is about?” After the children have briefly talked to a neighbor, one response might be, “Yes, it is about a dog and the dog is named Truman.”

The teacher then opens the book to the title page and asks, “What size of dog do you think Truman is?” She pauses to give children time to recall the new word, and then confirms their responses by saying, “Yes, he is a very big dog. In fact, we might say Truman is enormous.”

At this stage, Mrs. Ortiz might return to the notion of a story’s problem by asking, “What do you think Truman’s problem could be?” Many children will likely note the drool emerging from Truman’s mouth. Some will have had first-hand experience with drool and make more comments, perhaps about a younger sibling. When asked if they have seen a dog that drools, the children are likely to have many answers. As part of this conversation, it is helpful to turn to the “Truman, stop drooling” page. The illustration there shows a human hand wiping up Truman’s mess. The illustration sets the stage for the children to talk not only about a problem, but also about one solution to it.

**Ask Purposeful Questions During the Story**

During the actual read-aloud, Mrs. Ortiz returns often to the pictures, posing thoughtful questions that emphasize different parts of story grammar. The pages in Harper’s book are not numbered. One page that would work well for this purpose is the page that comes immediately after the title page. The text says “Truman, sit!” and the picture shows Truman’s owner with all his pets gathered around him in the kitchen. Mrs. Ortiz takes the opportunity to ask purposeful questions about character and setting such as these:

- What people and animals are in this family?
- What room are they in?
- What do you think the family members are like?
- What things remind you of your home?

**Open-ended questions prompt thought and language development.**

In addition to directing attention to aspects of story grammar, these questions are a mix of open-ended and closed ones. In particular, the open-ended questions prompt thought and language development. Some questions, particularly the first two on the list, might be posed to the entire group. Because they are closed questions, the answers will be quick and mostly predictable. In contrast either of the two open-ended questions would be suitable for a turn-and-talk experience because the children will want to explain their ideas.

**Attend to Story Structure**

The lynchpin of most plots is the main character’s problem and attempt to solve it. Helping children become sensitive to the problem/solution pattern is an important step in teaching about story structure. Now that the children in the example with Mrs. Ortiz are becoming familiar with the story and its main character, she may well return to her earlier question, “What is Truman’s problem?” As the children respond, the story will naturally be retold. However, by asking about Truman’s problem, the teacher highlights story structure to frame what would otherwise be a simple retelling.

Truman has a mass of problems, a laundry list of personal needs that children will readily identify. They typically note his enormous size, his poor hygiene, and his constant drool. They will giggle that he drinks and eats where he shouldn’t, steals toys, and jumps on humans. Some will even notice that he can’t heel or fetch and often sticks his nose where it doesn’t belong. Harper gives Truman so many problems that every child is likely to notice at least a few.

To enhance children’s understanding, Mrs. Ortiz asks the logical question, “How does Truman solve his problems?” The answer appears on the last page of the story. Truman goes to sleep and is no longer causing chaos in the house. Some children will even notice the thematic point that every new day is a new beginning.

The text on the book’s last page, as on every other page, is just one sentence long: “Good boy, Truman!” But for the first time in the story, the text is not a command or a reprimand. Finally, Truman receives praise. The picture, which spreads across two pages, tells it all. Truman is curled up on his bed, asleep with the smaller dog, Oscar. Bedtime fixes everything. Most children will be able to identify this problem and solution. In addition, they will likely empathize with Truman.
Making these personal connections with the character and the story, what Keene and Zimmermann (2007) call text-to-self connections, can help children remember the academic point about problems and solutions in stories.

**Make Ideas Visible With Graphic Organizers**

Teachers who use graphic organizers after interactive read-alouds help solidify what children are learning about story grammar. Because they help make ideas visible, graphic organizers lend themselves especially well to the teaching of reading or listening comprehension. They are also powerful tools for organizing information because they make the relationships among ideas concrete.

Teachers implement organizers of various styles and increasing complexity throughout a student’s education, so an ability to use graphic organizers is a life-long skill. In a world that has become increasingly dependent upon icons and images, people are both consumers and producers of graphic organizers. For example, the joint statement of the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English points to viewing and representing as two of the essential language arts, along with the arts of reading, writing, speaking, and listening (International Reading Association & National Council of Teachers of English, 1996).

For very young children, simple graphic organizers are the obvious choice. Teachers can engage young children both in understanding graphic organizers produced by adults and in creating organizers for themselves (Bredekamp, 2011).

**T-Chart**

Many teachers choose to introduce children to graphic organizers by addressing only a single narrative element, perhaps characters. For example, a simple graphic organizer such as the T-chart (see Figure 1) can be built around a question about a character such as, “Do you think Truman is polite?” The same format can and should be used repeatedly on other occasions to deal with other aspects of story grammar, particularly setting.

At the top of chart paper, write a simple yes/no question, in this case, “Is Truman polite?” Then fold the paper vertically to create two columns, one headed with Yes and the other with No. On this Yes/No-chart, the children’s pictures and/or names can be placed below the column representing their answer to the question. Reusable cards with both the picture and the name of each child work well for this type of graphic organizer. Not only do the children get the benefit of helping to make a T-chart, they also are encouraged to read their own name.

**Webs as Story Maps**

A more sophisticated type of graphic organizer is a web, which might be used to illustrate the major elements of story grammar: characters, setting, problem, and solution. For *Sit, Truman!*, a web resembling a doghouse is thematically appropriate (see Figure 2).

To create this graphic organizer, use a large piece of chart paper with the top corners folded toward the middle to resemble a roof on a doghouse. Divide the remainder of the chart paper into four boxes (or rooms) for each of the parts of story grammar: characters, setting, problem, and solution. Ask the children to draw pictures in each portion of
Timelines and Venn diagrams

Graphic organizers should suit the teaching purpose and pattern of the book. Timelines (see Figure 3) and Venn diagrams (see Figure 4) are graphic organizers commonly used with young children; however, they are less directly applicable to Sit, Truman! than the T-chart and the web.

Timelines can support almost any retelling, but they are most effective with texts that have a strongly sequential pattern. For example, after reading a version of the old nursery counting rhyme, Over in the Meadow (Galdone, 1986; Wadsworth, 2002), children can use simple picture cards representing each character and the number associated with the character, such as one turtle, two frogs, or three beavers. Encourage children to help make these cards. Children then place the cards in the appropriate order. A pocket chart, chalkboard ledge, or even the floor can be used to hold the cards.

A Venn diagram is ideal for helping children visualize how relationships compare and contrast in simple stories such as a Corduroy (Freeman, 1968) or Where’s My Teddy? (Alborough, 1994).

After reading a book about a teddy bear, the teacher asks children if they have pets. As the conversation continues, write key phrases on cards about the children’s pets. Then place two plastic hoops on the floor or make intersecting circles with masking tape. Label the first hoop “Our Pets” and the second hoop “Teddy Bear.”

As the children discuss their pets, the word and/or picture cards describing only their pets go in the Our Pets hoop. As the children talk about the teddy bear in the story, the teacher records key words about the teddy bear. For example, in the Our Pets hoop, the word living might describe the pet whereas in the Teddy Bear hoop, the words non-living or pretend might describe the teddy bear. A card that might fall into the overlapping section of the hoops might be two eyes.

In a follow-up discussion, teachers can help children see likenesses and differences between the two categories. For young children, the conversation that ensues can be just
as important as the words that are placed in the diagram. Intentionally use rich vocabulary to scaffold the children’s learning of new words.

**Literacy Extensions**

*Sit, Truman!* has many possibilities for meaningful literacy extensions.

- **Class-made book** on responsible pet ownership. What a natural follow-up to the repeated reading and discussion about the pets in *Sit, Truman!*
- **Art center.** Children paint pictures of their pets, find pictures of pets in magazines, and use modeling compound to form pet sculptures.
- **Pet-themed dramatic play** with stuffed animals, a cardboard box to turn into a doghouse, pet toys, and dog care items such as a collar and a leash, a comb and brush, dog bowls, dog tags, and lots of books about dogs. Pet food containers and boxes both provide environmental print and suggest children’s homes.
- **Veterinary clinic.** Literacy items for dramatic play may include a clipboard for calling patients into the clinic and notepads for prescription writing. Leashes and collars, pet tags, and stuffed animals for patients give more realism to the setting. A rebus picture chart of children’s drawings of pet-related words such as dog, cat, bowl, food, leash, and collar affords a viable opportunity for drawing and writing words for the center.

In this article *Sit, Truman!* was used to illustrate how open-ended questions can make a read-aloud more interactive and engaging. Teachers of young children can also promote comprehension by introducing story structure and graphic organizers. By applying these teaching strategies in the meaningful context of story time, teachers have the opportunity to build habits of the mind that promote both reading and listening comprehension. The interactions a teacher chooses during story time can help young children see patterns within a story and actively create meaning. By embedding this teaching of comprehension strategies in the magic of a story, teachers can also make the reading experience a joyful one.

**Use graphic organizers after interactive read-alouds to help solidify what children are learning about story grammar. Graphic organizers lend themselves especially well to the teaching of reading or listening comprehension. They also make the relationships among ideas concrete.**

**Figure 4. Venn diagram for Where’s My Teddy?**
References


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Classroom Ideas!

A Sick Day for Amos McGee is an excellent book to teach children about caring for one another, daily routines, patterning, and emergent literacy skills.

**LITERACY:** In small or large groups, guide children through comprehension strategies—predict, question, clarify, and summarize—during a read-aloud. Use one of the graphic organizers identified in the Moore and Hall article to represent children's ideas.

**ART:** Display pictures of various animals from the story in the art center. Children create their own illustrations related to vocabulary found in the story.

**SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL SKILLS:** Teach children about the predictable routine of the classroom schedule and caring for one another. After reading the book, provide props for children to act out how Amos cares for his friends. Role play ways children may care for one another.

**MATH:** Show images from the story to create the predictable pattern Mr. McGee follows each day. Then discuss how the pattern changes on his sick day. Offer additional manipulatives for children to create their own patterns.

**PRETEND PLAY:** Create a zoo theme for dramatic play. Include stuffed animals represented in the story so children may act it out after a read-aloud. Be sure to display the book so children may use it as a reference for their play.

**SCIENCE:** This book portrays fantasy interactions among a zookeeper and animals. Find nonfiction texts about each of the animals represented in the story so children may learn facts about how these animals really live and interact in their natural habitats.

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