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Story impressions: A prereading/writing activity

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■ Perhaps one of the most persistent and inescapable lessons of reading research of the last decade is that we understand what is new to us in terms of what we already know. To comprehend, the reader must use the clues supplied by the author to activate appropriate prior knowledge structures usually called schemata. Once active, the schemata can serve as a basis for making predictions.

The proficient reader then tests his or her schema based predictions by evaluating them for goodness of fit with the subsequent information (clues) supplied by the author. Hence, understanding develops as the reader progressively revises his or her initial model until it approximates the model intended by the author.

One result of this view of the comprehension process has been renewed interest in finding ways for reading professionals to help readers activate their knowledge prior to reading a passage (Moore, Readence, and Rickelman, 1982.)

As a new prereading writing activity, story impressions differ from other kinds of previews (c.f., Graves, Cooke, and LaBerge, 1983) in that they do not give away large amounts of story content in order to improve comprehension. Using just key words, they aid

readers in building anticipatory models of the text prior to reading. The reader's model or blueprint is then confirmed or modified as the reader encounters the details of the actual story.

In this way, story impressions induce young and less proficient readers to engage in interactive reading, as well as to formulate their own content preview. The approach can be used with students of all ages, including older remedial readers.

This technique is wholly consistent with and directly derivable from current model based views of the reading process (Anderson and Pearson, 1984; Rumelhart, 1984; Rumelhart and Ortony, 1977). It is also highly compatible with Stauffer's (1969) view of reading as a thinking activity.

Stauffer outlined a reading lesson strategy intended to promote reading as a thinking process. Based on student centered discussions, it is known as the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DRTA). In the DRTA reading lesson the teacher gets the students to predict, read, and then prove their conclusions.

After an initial survey of the title and accompanying pictures or diagrams, the readers are encouraged to develop purposes for reading by making predictions as to the content of the selection. They also learn to test their predictions as they read.

As a variation, students may be told to read an initial segment of the passage before being asked to suggest what will happen next or to declare purposes for reading the next segment. Each segment is then read and discussed in this fashion, with predictions becoming more accurate as the reading progresses.

Story impressions operate in a simi-

lar manner. Story impressions get readers to predict the events of the story that will be read, by providing them with fragments of the actual content. After reading the set of clues, the students are asked to render them comprehensible by using them to compose a story of their own in advance of reading the actual tale.

The procedure varies from the typical DRTA lesson in two important ways. First, with story impressions the students are given a more systematic set of clues, ones which closely approximate the "top level" structure of the text (Mandler, 1984; Meyer, 1975). Second, with story impressions the students are asked to compose a story of their own after first examining the clues as a prediction of what the upcoming story could be about.

Thus, story impressions differ from the typical DRTA lesson by requiring readers to construct an entire model of the story to be read, rather than simply to make some guesses about what might happen. The combination of prediction with writing in the case of story impressions is also a way to realign the perspective of less proficient readers, so they begin to view reading as a drafting and composing process.

A sample set of story impressions

Story impressions are story fragments in the form of clue words and phrases, which, when assembled, enable the reader to form an overall *impression* of how characters and events interact in the story.

The first Figure has a set of story impressions for "The Tell-Tale Heart" by Edgar Allan Poe. The clue words are selected directly from the story and are presented in sequence with arrows or lines indicating clue order. In the case

**Story impressions (prereading) activity
based on Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart"**

Story impressions given to a class	A remedial 8th grader's story guess written from the story impressions
<p>house ↓ old man ↓ young man ↓ hatred ↓ ugly eye ↓ death ↓ tub, blood, knife ↓ buried ↓ floor ↓ police ↓ heartbeat ↓ guilt ↓ crazy ↓ confession</p>	<p>There was a young man and his father, an old man. They lived in a house on a hill out in the bouniey's. The old man hated his son because he had an ugly eye.</p> <p>The young man was asleep in his bedroom when he was awakend by screaming. He went to the bedroom and saw his father laying in the tub. There was blood everywhere and a knife through him.</p> <p>The young man found a tape recording hidden behind the door on the floor. He turned it on there was screaming on the tape. The young man started to call the police, but then he stopped and remembered what his mother had told him. She had told him that he had a split personality. So he called the police and confessed to being crazy and killing his father. His heartbeat was heavy as he called.</p>

of "The Tell-Tale Heart," the clues suggest some sort of murder scheme that ultimately ends with a confession.

The illustration also presents a *story guess* written by an 8th grader. Note that the central events of the hypothesized story include a murder scene and confession complete with incidents similar to those of the original Poe tale. The object, of course, is not for the student to guess the details or the exact relations among the events and characters of the story, but to simply compare his or her own story guess to the author's actual account.

Support for the use of story impressions

McGinley and Denner (1985) compared the use of story impressions as a prereading activity with reading only,

for remedial 8th grade students. After reading the story impressions, the students were instructed to write a logical story of their own based on how they thought the impressions fit together.

The second Figure presents the story impressions selected for the passage used in the investigation, "Never Trust a Lady" by Victor Canning (1977). The story describes a locksmith who has a mania for rare books. Once a year he steals jewels to pay for the books. This year, however, he is caught by a young lady who tricks him into opening a safe. Arrested, he ends up as the assistant prison librarian.

The Figure also presents a story guess written by one of the students who participated in the study.

The results of the study indicated that the prereading activity of process-

Story impressions activity based on Canning's "Never Trust a Lady"

Story impressions given to subjects	An 8th grader's story guess
<p>Horace ↓ locksmith ↓ prison ↓ jewel theft ↓ expensive books ↓ robbery ↓ kitchen door ↓ safe ↓ sneeze ↓ voice ↓ lady ↓ agreement ↓ combination ↓ jewels ↓ arrested ↓ fingerprints ↓ gray haired woman ↓ prison librarian ↓ mad</p>	<p>Once there was this guy named Horace. People thinks he's not responsible and they think he is a locksmith. That was sent to prison for breaking into houses. There was a jewel theft. The guy took the expensive book to.</p> <p>Horace had a robbery planned out. He got out of prison. He went over to the neighborhood. He was to go into this kitchen door, and opening the safe, but all of a sudden he sneezed. He heard a voice from a young lady. He sensed that there was going to be trouble. He hoped she wouldn't see him, but she did.</p> <p>Horace said to the lady that he would put the stuff back. When he did this he said he will forget the combination, but he still took the jewels. The cops came and arrested him, and the cops took his fingerprints. The grayed hair woman took him to prison for the rest of his life. He was a prison-librarian for the rest of his life. He was mad.</p>

ing the clues into a logical story interpretation had a significant facilitative effect on subsequent story comprehension. Ability to approximate the author's story in the story guess was not significantly related to comprehending the actual story upon reading it. The process of developing the story guess itself, whether it was parallel to the original or not, and then actively testing it was apparently the major factor in facilitating comprehension.

We obtained similar findings for average and superior 8th grade readers, although the facilitative effect was not as great for the high ability students as

for the remedial students (Denner and McGinley, 1986). More recently, it was found that story impressions are effective with students as young as the 2nd grade (Denner, in preparation).

Added support for the use of story impressions comes from the many teachers who have already tried them with their students and report positive results across grades 2 and above.

How to introduce story impressions

- Step 1: Start with a general introduction, such as: "Today we're going to make up what we think this story *could* be about."

● Step 2: Introduce the story impressions by saying: "Here are some *clues* about the story we're going to read. We're going to use these clues to write our own version of the story. After that, we'll read the story together to see if the author had ideas similar to ours."

◆ Step 3: Have everyone read through all of the clues once. Then, using the chalkboard or a transparency, brainstorm ideas to logically connect all of the clues in the order presented.

● Step 4: Using the ideas generated by the students, compose a short story together on the board (or on a transparency) that connects all of the clues. Read the class's story with your students when finished. If time runs out, reread the story again at the beginning of the next class meeting before going on to Step 5.

● Step 5: Have the students read the author's actual story silently, or you read it to them orally. When finished, discuss the ways in which the students' story was similar to or different from the author's story. Indicate that the closeness of match with the author's story is not important. Tell your students that the only important thing is to write a logical story based on the clues given, and then as they read, to think about how their version agreed or disagreed with the author's story.

● Step 6: On subsequent occasions, have students write their own prediction story based on a set of clues from a different tale, or to promote cooperative learning, have students complete this activity in small groups.

How to develop a set of story impressions

The following rules for developing story impressions are based on our experiences and feedback from teachers

who have tried this activity.

(1) Read through the entire story at least once.

(2) Reread the story and select words: (a) choose words that designate characters, setting, and key elements of the plot; (b) use a word directly from the story where possible, substituting a different word only when it makes it easier to capture an entire episode; (c) use a maximum of 3 words per clue; (d) limit the number of clues to 10-15 or less for a short story (or chapter) and 15-20 clues for an entire young adult novel.

(3) Arrange the clues vertically, and use arrows or lines to indicate clue order.

When developing story impressions for a young adult novel, look at the table of contents or chapter titles. This has been tried with students in an effort to get them to use the story impressions procedure independently of their teacher. While they use the chapter titles as clues, students gain valuable insights into the function of a table of contents.

Of course, not all publishers supply such tables, and not all tables of contents provide effective clues. This is unfortunate because, considered as story impressions, these tables can provide adolescent readers with the basis for a meaningful student centered prereading strategy.

Story impressions as a writing activity

Story impressions can also be used to reintroduce writing into the classroom. Students like writing stories based on the impressions, and the experience of connecting the clues in a logical fashion can help them begin to see both reading and writing as a composing process (Tierney and Pearson, 1983).

It has been our informal observation that students who compose a story guess of their own before reading begin to attend to more than the plot of the actual story. Quite spontaneously, they direct many of their comments during postreading discussions to issues related to the author's craft.

Apparently, because of their own involvement in writing the story guess, they begin to view themselves as authors as well. Thus, story impressions as a previewing technique may be an effective means to encourage students to approach reading from the perspective of a writer.

Other uses for story impressions

- Story impressions can be used as a notetaking technique for narrative texts or films.
- Story impressions can guide students in writing a story summary.
- The clues can act as a memory retrieval device. One teacher has had her students use story impressions to give oral book reports with good results.
- Story impressions can be used to assist students in generating and answering their own questions about a story.
- The technique can help students develop sequencing skills (i.e., which set of clues is in the same order as they occurred in the story?)

In summary, teachers can use story impressions as a new way to help stu-

dents realize that reading, much like writing, is an active composition process. Story impressions can also be used to integrate reading and writing lessons.

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