CT Literacy Conference

Welcome to the Connecticut Literacy Conference

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CT Literacy Conference

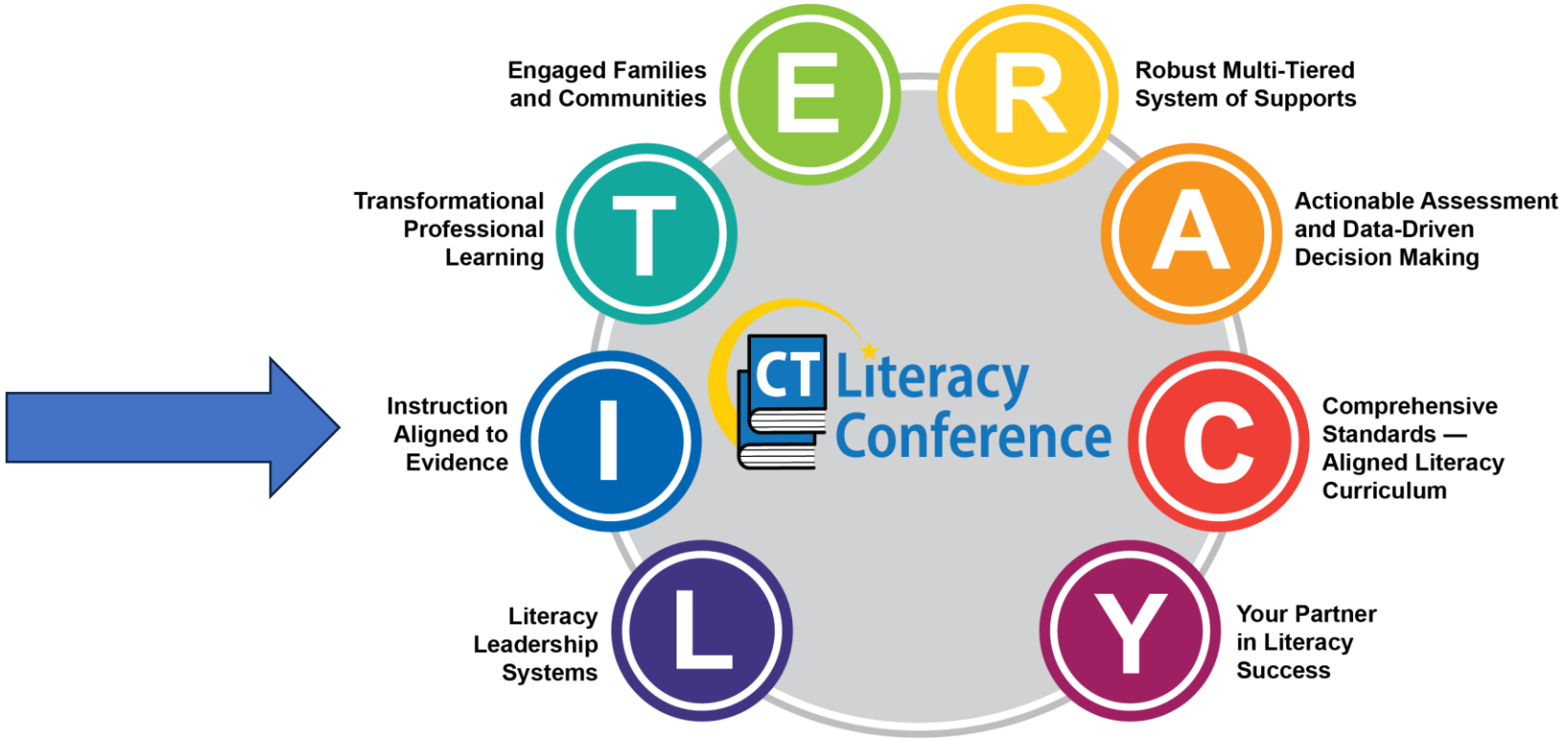
Opening Doors to Complex Text: Unlocking Access for All Students

Presenters: Deirdre Savarese and Taylor Parker

October 29, 2026

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Center for Literacy Research and Reading Success



Session Outcomes

- Develop a clear understanding of the role that grade-level text plays in evidence-aligned literacy instruction.
- Consider why some students struggle and how over-scaffolding can hinder reading development.
- Investigate strategic scaffolds to support the phases of the reading process: before, during, and after.
- Engage with Andover Elementary to learn how implementing strategic reading scaffolds for grade level text supports student reading outcomes.

Activate Knowledge

- Read a short article on marathon running
- Identify the supports you would need to increase your comprehension
- Share with a shoulder partner



Background: Grade-Level Text and Tasks

Grade-level texts and tasks are both defined as being aligned to the complexity and content expectations of a student's grade level, as indicated by the content-area standards.

Text

- Supports knowledge building across a range of topics and concepts.
- Increases access and exposure to complex vocabulary and sentence structure.
- Levels the field--all students have access to common knowledge, academic language.
- Raises expectations for student performance.

Task

- Ensures that students have meaningful opportunities to engage in rigorous thinking through intentional learning activities.
- Allows students to demonstrate knowledge and skills expected at their grade levels.

Four Corners: Setting the Context

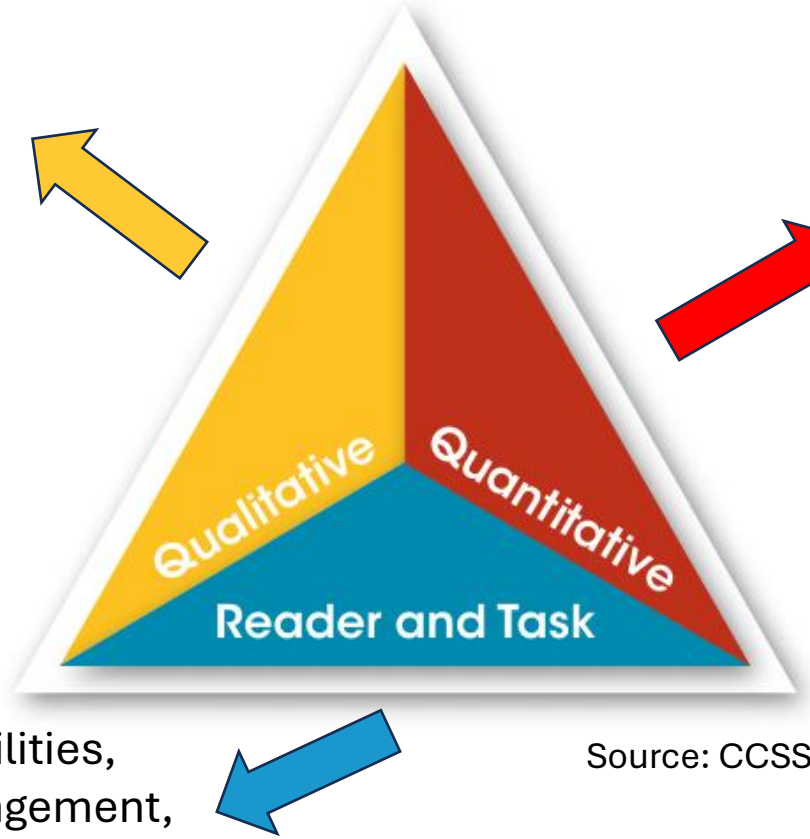
1. Gather in one of four corners based on your role: teacher, coach, school or district leader, other.

2. Discuss the following with your groupmates:

   - What is the role of complex, grade-level text in your setting?
   - How do you know that the materials you are using are complex and at grade level?
   - How prepared are most of your students to access complex, grade-level text?
   - How practiced are your teachers in using complex text and supporting all students with access?

Understanding Text Complexity

Assess the content of a text. Think about layers of meaning, text structure, degree of language complexity, and knowledge demands.



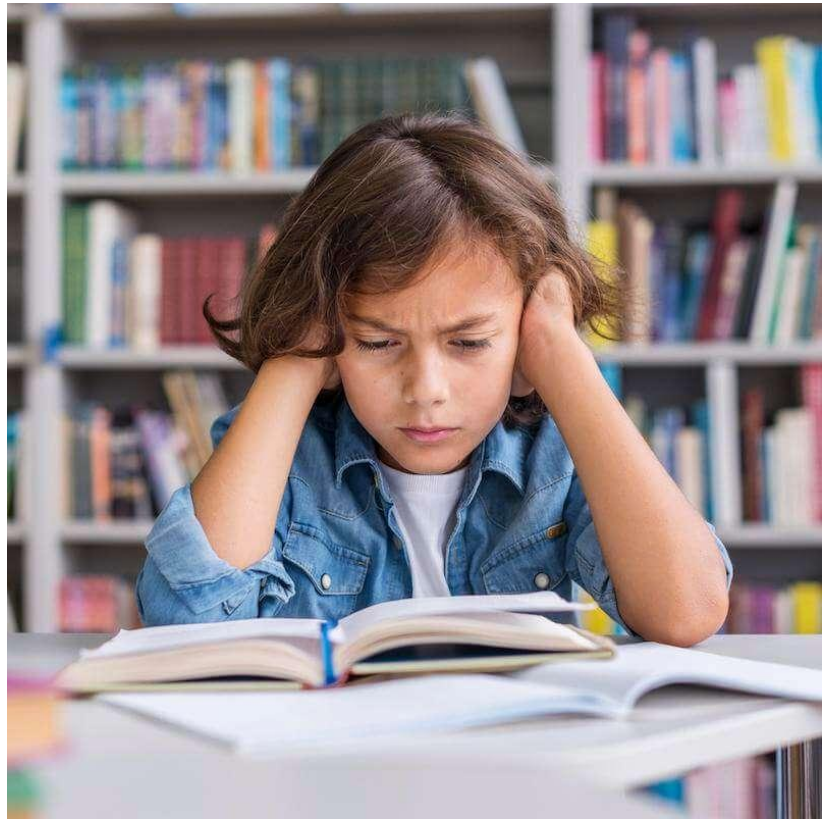
Identify the features that can be counted or quantified. Think about word-level and syntax-level demands.

Consider reader's cognitive capabilities, reading skills, motivation and engagement, prior knowledge, content concerns.

Source: CCSSO, 2010.

The Struggle to Access Complex Text

- Foundational skills and fluency
- Language demands: oral language, academic vocabulary, complex sentence structure, figurative language, or language conventions
- Gaps in background and content knowledge
- Inference making, comprehension monitoring, knowledge of text structure, and working memory
- Limited exposure to complex text or access to grade-level literacy experiences



What Can Over-Scaffolding Look Like?

- The teacher reads and interprets central text aloud on a regular basis.
- Students are given below grade level versions of central text.
- Teacher consistently defines most unfamiliar words.
- Teacher provides summaries/analyses of content, asks leading or close-ended questions, or directs students to specific text-based answers.
- The tasks associated with a grade-level text are designed at low levels of rigor and offer few opportunities for cognitive struggle.
- Teacher leads discussions to ensure lesson objectives are accomplished and resists letting students wrestle independently with complex concepts or activities.

The Risks of Over-Scaffolding





Over-Scaffolding may lower:

- Cognitive engagement and comprehension weakness
- Student self-esteem
- Preparation for critical thinking due to dependence on teacher support
- Equity of access for all students
- Loss of rigor and teacher knowledge of student ability
- Value of productive struggle

The Guiding Principle: Scaffold, then Fade

- Keep grade-level text and learning goal intact
- Model the skill or strategy explicitly
- Guide the students through supported practice
- Monitor student understanding and adjust support
- Fade scaffold as students develop proficiency (GRR)
- Check for independence



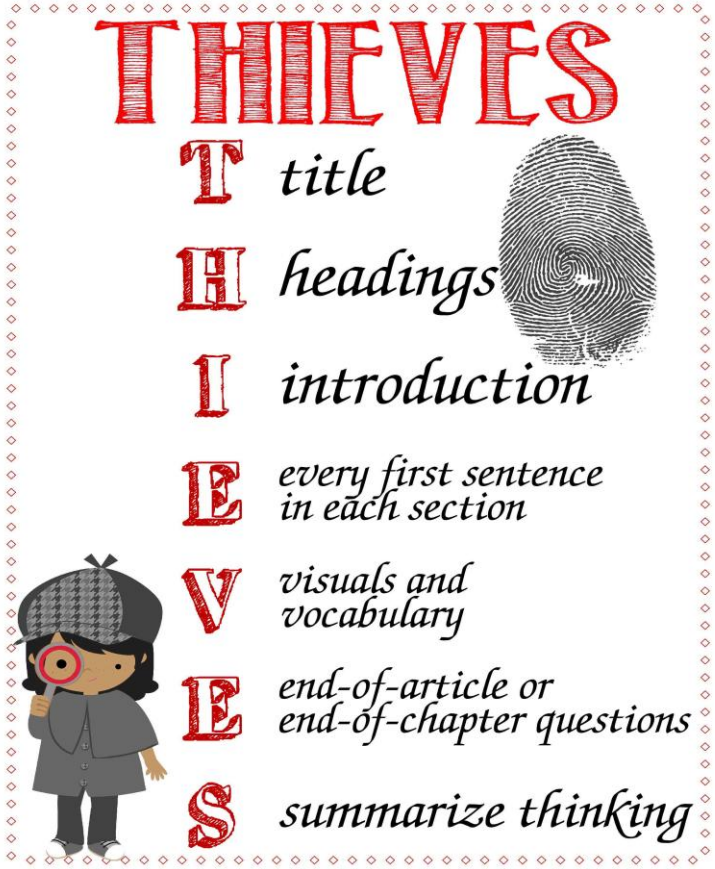
Role of the Teacher: Preparing Instruction

- Read the text beforehand to anticipate opportunities, challenges, and instructional possibilities.
- Identify the key ideas: What concepts do students need to understand?
- Choose text-critical vocabulary: What essential words do students need to make meaning and express understanding?
- Anticipate and plan for context-specific, appropriate scaffolds.



Strategy 1: Preview Text with THIEVES

- Previewing text is a research-based strategy.
- Routine to approach new material, access prior knowledge, and apply purpose for reading.
- Purpose: Readers develop background knowledge to increase comprehension during reading.



Source: The Curriculum Corner (McEldowney & Henry, n.d.). https://www.thecurriculumcorner.com/

Manz, S. L. (2002). A strategy for previewing textbooks: Teaching readers to become THIEVES. The Reading Teacher, 55(5), 434–435.

Strategy 1: The Basics

THIEVES Element	Sample Questions to Ask Myself	Other Questions I Could Ask
Title	What is the title? What is my prior knowledge on this topic?	
Headings	How is the information divided? What are the smaller topics in the text?	
Introduction	What information does the introduction provide?	
Every first sentence in a paragraph	What do I think the selection is going to be about based on the first sentence of each paragraph?	
Visuals and vocabulary	What information do the visuals add? Are there important words in bold or italics or any that are highlighted? Do I know what those words mean?	
End-of-text questions	What do the questions ask me to know? Given the questions, what do I think the reading will be about?	
Summary	What do I think the main idea will be?	

Source: Throndsen (2025), Figure 2.12, Raising Up Readers. © 2025 Solution Tree Press.

- THIEVES: Strategy informed by the research on previewing text.
- What: Students survey a text to establish a purpose for reading, explore key elements, access prior knowledge, and create a mental map.
- Who: Upper elementary readers through college. Appropriate for whole class and individuals.
- Text Genre: Identify the genre before using. Approach to THIEVES will vary if literary vs. informational text.
- Gradual Release of Responsibility: Teacher models the strategy explicitly, provides guided practice, and gradually releases as students become more independent.
- Strong anchor for ELs/MLs

Strategy 2: Summarize with Paragraph Shrinking

- Paragraph shrinking is a summarization and main idea identification strategy that supports reading comprehension.
- Using paragraph shrinking with peer-assisted comprehension instruction is an evidence-informed during reading strategy closely associated with Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS).
- Reciprocal peer tutoring routine teaches students to summarize by identifying and generating the main ideas in a text to support comprehension.
- Purpose: Readers gain access to the cognitively rigorous process of summarizing using structured prompts and sharing ideas in reciprocal fashion with a partner.



Fuchs, D. Fuchs, L.S., Mathes, P.G., & Simmons, D.C. (1997). Peer-assisted learning strategies: Making classrooms more responsive to diversity. *American Educational Research Journal, 34(1),* 174-206. https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312034001174?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Strategy 2: The Basics

- Paragraph Shrinking with Reciprocal Peer Tutoring: Research-informed instructional strategy.
- What: Students work in strategic partner pairs, take turns as the “coach” and the “reader” to shrink a paragraph down to its most essential idea, describe their thinking to a peer, and receive peer feedback.
- Who: All readers. Read-aloud or student text depends on age of reader.
- Gradual Release of Responsibility: Teacher models the strategy explicitly, provides guided practice, and gradually releases as students before more independent.
- Strong anchor for ELs/MLs

Throndsen, Jennifer. (2025). *Raising up readers: 25 scaffolding strategies to help students access challenging text.* Solution Tree Press.

Strategy 2: Shrinking a Paragraph

Paragraph Shrinking: Reader

Step 1: Read the text aloud to your partner.

Step 2: Pause at the "stop and think" points. Tell your partner:

1. The *who* or *what*
   Sentence starter: "The *who* or *what* is/are . . ."
2. The most important thing about what the *who* or *what* did
   Sentence starter: "The most important thing about *who* or *what* is . . ."
3. The main idea in ten or fewer words

Step 3: Respond to your coach's feedback to improve your response.

Step 4: Repeat until it's time to switch roles.

Source: Throndsen (2025), Figure 3.24, Raising Up Readers. © 2025 Solution Tree Press.

Paragraph Shrinking: Coach

Step 1: Follow along and track the text as your partner reads.

Step 2: Pause at the "stop and think" points. Ask your partner to:

1. Name the *who* or *what*
2. Tell the most important thing about what the *who* or *what* did
3. Summarize the main idea in ten or fewer words

Step 3: Provide the reader with any feedback they need to improve their response. If you aren't sure what the correct response is, ask the teacher for help.

Step 4: Repeat until it's time to switch roles.

Source: Throndsen (2025), Figure 3.25, Raising Up Readers. © 2025 Solution Tree Press.

Shrinking a Paragraph in 3 Steps:

1. Name the *who* or *what* the passage is about.
2. Tell the most important thing about what the *who* or *what* did.
3. Summarize the main idea in ten words or fewer. (Note: The *who* or *what* counts as a single word)

Throndsen, Jennifer. (2025). *Raising up readers: 25 scaffolding strategies to help students access challenging text.* Solution Tree Press.

Strategy 2: Teacher Moves

1

Step One: Establish student partnerships.

- Strategic partnerships work best.
- Pair more proficient readers with those who are less proficient.
- Maintain partnerships for several sessions to allow for skill building.

2

Step Two: Explicitly teach the process.

- Students take turns serving as the "coach" and the "reader."
- Have the more proficient reader coach first to model the feedback process.
- Reader reads for a set amount of time and shrinks the passage to the most essential idea.
- Coach feedback focuses on three possible responses:
  - Rethinking the *who* or *what*
  - Supporting the revision of the key details
  - Determining if summary sentence is ten words or less

3

Step Three: Model the strategy.

- Start with a less challenging text to teach the coaching process.
- Consider using a read-aloud to facilitate cognitive thinking.
- Chunk up the text. Indicate where to stop and think.
- Model how to figure out the main idea, discriminate key details.
- Explicitly teach how to paraphrase the main idea.
- Scaffold all parts of the learning by practicing in steps, fishbowling process with a student, or videoing an exemplar.

Strategy 3: Back to the Text with Text-Dependent Questions



- Research-based after reading strategy
- Routine based on a scaffolded set of text-based questions that facilitate comprehension through student discourse.
- Purpose: Readers develop a set of increasingly complex question types that they ultimately use as independent readers.

Strategy 3:Text-Dependent Discussion Matters

Builds Comprehension

Students return to the text and construct meaning from it, not from a guess.

Demands Evidence

Every claim is anchored to words, sentences, and details on the page.

Grows Academic Language

Students borrow the author's words and practice the language of reasoning.

Levels the Field

Everyone has the same text in hand, so success does not depend on background experience.

Strategy 3: What Makes a Question Text-Dependent?

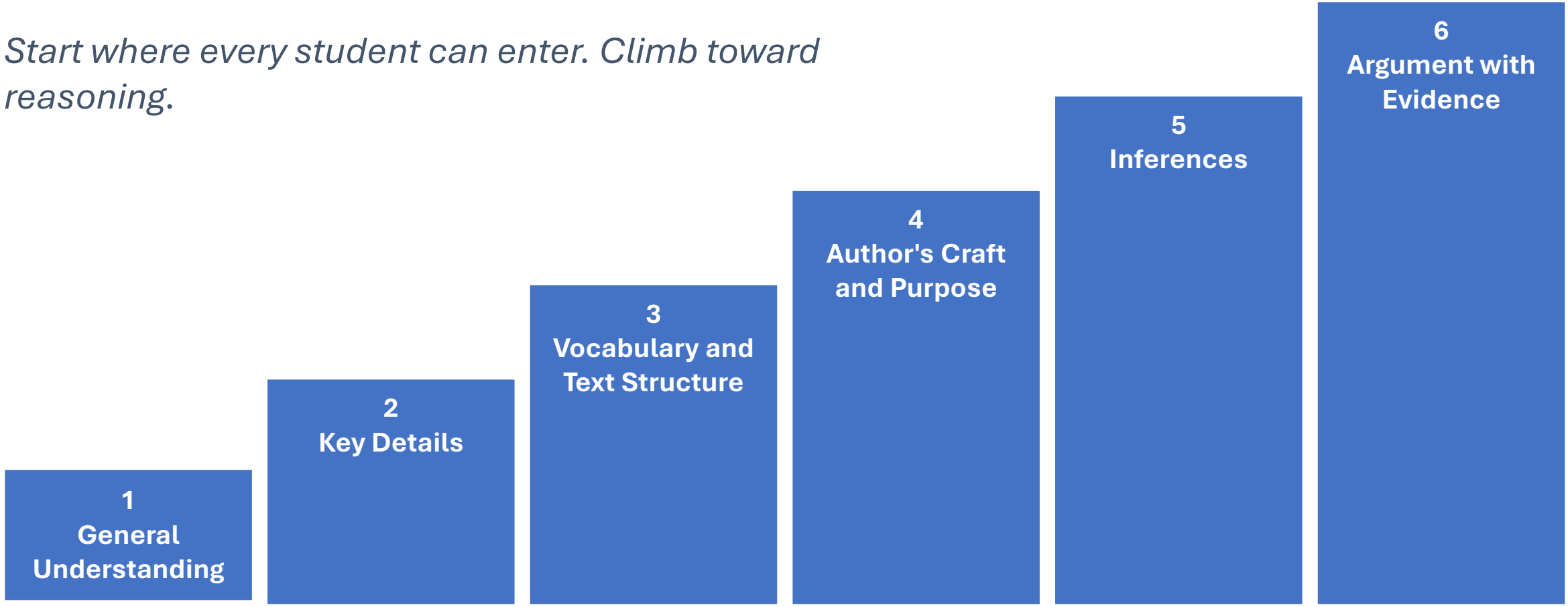
- It can only be answered by reading the text.
- It points students to specific words, sentences, or details.
- It builds toward the meaning of the whole text.

Instead of...
"What would you do if you were Fox?"

Try...
"How does Rabbit's invitation change the way Fox acts? Which words show the change?"

The Scaffold: A Question Staircase

Start where every student can enter. Climb toward reasoning.



Adapted from Fisher & Frey (2012), Progression of Text-Dependent Questions.

Talk Structures and Stems

Think → **Jot** → **Pair** → **Share**

Every student rehearses before anyone shares whole group.

Make a claim
I think ___ because the text says ___.

Build on a peer
I agree with ___ and want to add ___.

Push for evidence
Where in the text do you see that?

Respectfully disagree
I see it differently because on page ___ …

Scaffolds for Every Learner

Reread in Chunks

Return to one paragraph or page, not the whole text

Sentence Frames

Posted, printed, or on a ring at the table

Word Banks

Key text words with visuals for quick reference

Jot Before Talk

A sticky note, a sketch, or a highlighted line

Partner Roles

Speaker and evidence checker, then switch

Gradual Release

I model, we practice, you lead the talk

Try It: 60-Second Turn and Talk

Fox sat at the edge of the meadow while the other animals tumbled in the tall grass. Her tail drooped. She pressed her paws into the cold dirt and stared at the ground. "They never ask me," she whispered. Then Rabbit hopped over, ears high. "We need one more for the race," he said. Fox lifted her head.

Question
How does Fox change from the beginning to the end? Use two details from the text.

Stem
At first, Fox ___. I know because the text says ___. By the end, Fox ___ because ___.

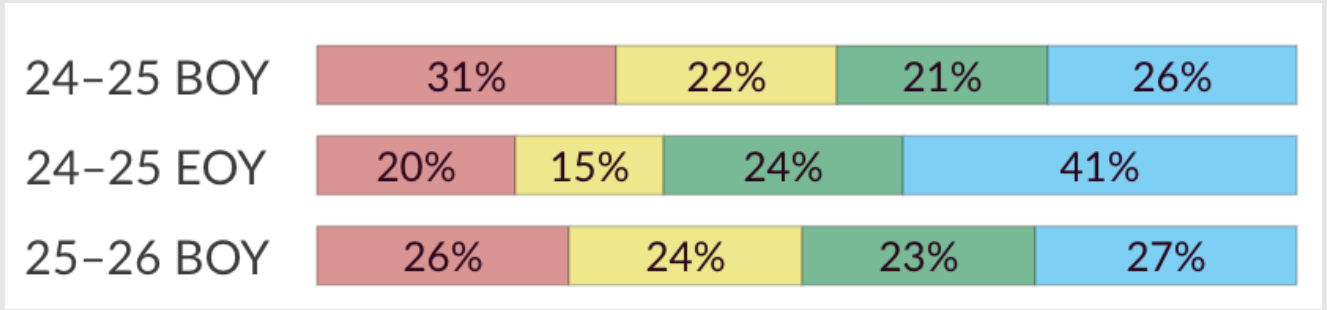
Andover Elementary: The Impact

Text-dependent questioning, coupled with student discourse, had the following effects:

- Increased cognitive load on students
- Growth in the use of evidence in writing based on discussion practice
- Ownership over discussion questions – leading to increased engagement during reading
- Increase in students' ability to listen and attend to each other's thinking

Where We Started

DIBELS Composite Scores



District	School Year							
	2021-22		2022-23		2023-24		2024-25	
	Total Number with Scored Tests	Percentage Level 3 or 4 (Met or Exceeded) %	Total Number with Scored Tests	Percentage Level 3 or 4 (Met or Exceeded) %	Total Number with Scored Tests	Percentage Level 3 or 4 (Met or Exceeded) %	Total Number with Scored Tests	Percentage Level 3 or 4 (Met or Exceeded) %
Andover School District	77	53.2	82	62.2	92	58.7	108	64.8

Andover Elementary

PreK to Grade 6

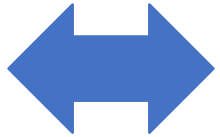
About 250 students

One administrator and a teacher leadership team

We Built Knowledge

The Science

What high-quality, research-based literacy instruction looks like



Our Curriculum

The components of the program we chose, and how they are designed to work

Two parallel tracks of learning, side by side

We Focused on Instruction

Word Recognition

Explicit Decoding
Systematic instruction through each step

Daily Fluency Practice
Choral reading and partner reading

Language Comprehension

Grade-Level Text for All
Every student, every day

Vocabulary Instruction
Explicit and intentional

Explicit Sentence Composition
Building sentences that carry meaning

Then We Audited Our Curriculum

We Collaborated and Learned Together

Learning Walks

- Teachers visit each other's classrooms
- Focused on one instructional practice at a time
- Study the instruction, not the teacher

Weekly Vertical Data Teams

- Teams span grade levels
- Study student work and progress monitoring data
- Leave with a plan for the next two weeks

We Narrowed Our Focus

One new initiative:

Accountable Talk

Grounded in the science

We knew it would move learning

Works across every subject

Literacy, math, science, and more

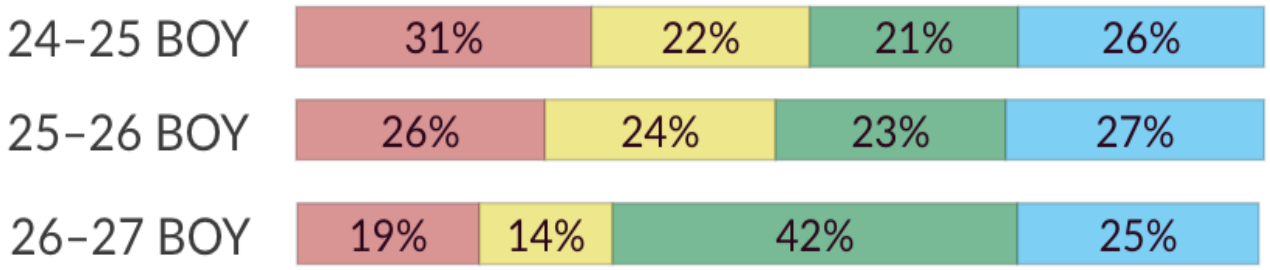
Works across every age

PreK through Grade 6

Everything else was refinement and expertise in what we already had.

Where We Are Now

DIBELS Composite Scores



SBAC Proficiency:
25 – 26: 73%

Three Lessons

1. Study before you change
2. Monitor often, respond fast
3. Do fewer things, deeply

Session Outcomes and Reflection

- Develop a clear understanding of the role that grade-level text plays in evidence-aligned literacy instruction.
- Consider why some students struggle and how over-scaffolding can hinder reading development.
- Investigate strategic scaffolds to support the phases of the reading process: before, during, and after.
- Engage with Andover Elementary to learn how implementing strategic reading scaffolds for grade level text supports student reading outcomes.



One question I still have about before, during, or after reading scaffolds.

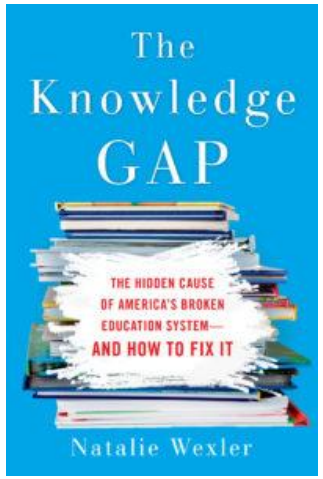
One idea that challenged my thinking about why all students need chances to engage with grade-level text.



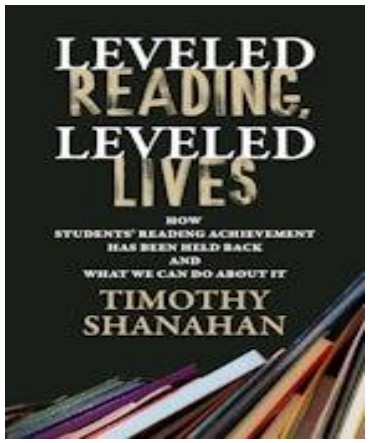


One opportunity to increase access to grade-level text while building student independence.

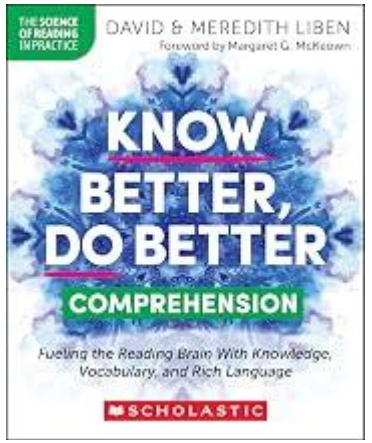
Resources: Grade-Level Instruction, Knowledge, and Scaffolds



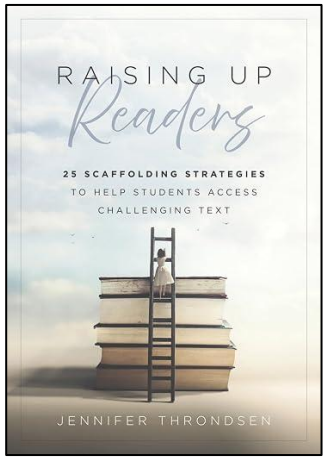
The Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America's Broken Education System—And How to Fix it
Natalie Wexler



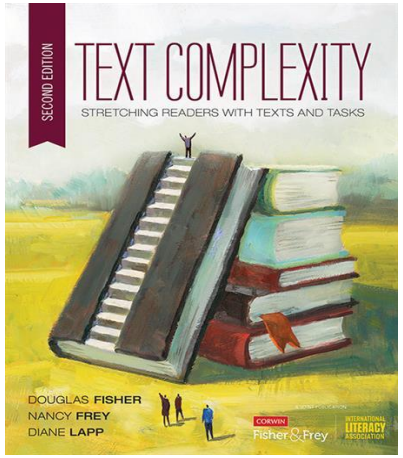
Leveled Reading, Leveled Lives: How Students' Reading Achievement Has Been Held Back and What We Can Do About It
Timothy Shanahan



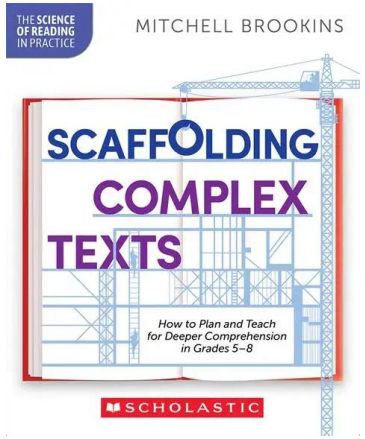
Know Better, Do Better: Comprehension: Fueling the Reading Brain with Knowledge, Vocabulary, and Rich Language
David and Meredith Liben



Raising Up Readers: Twenty-Five Scaffolding Strategies to Help Students Access Challenging Text
Jennifer Throndsen



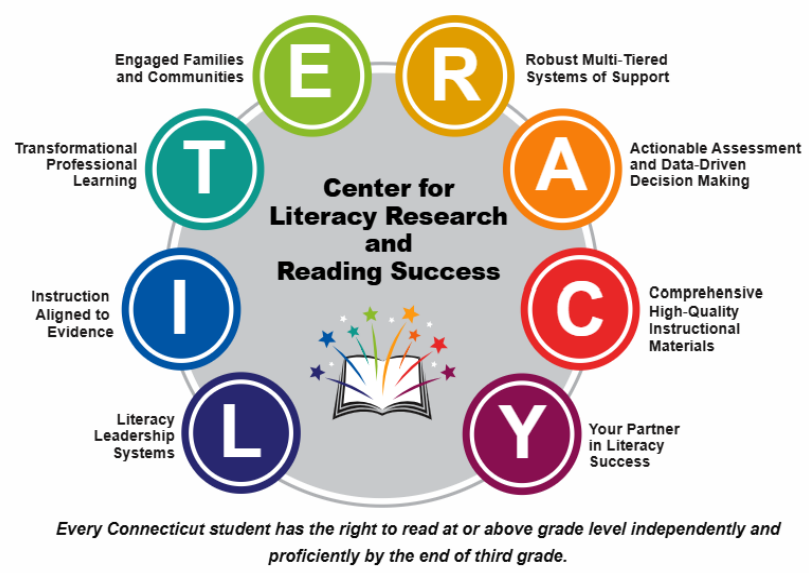
Text Complexity: Stretching Readers with Texts and Tasks
Douglas Fischer, Nancy Frey, and Diane Lapp



Scaffolding Complex Texts: How to Plan and Teach for Deeper Comprehension in Grades 5-8
Mitchell Brookins

Center Resources

- The Center website: Center for Literacy Research and Reading Success
- Connecticut's K–12 Literacy Strategy



- *Literacy at the Center* Podcast
- Strategic School and District Moves

What are you working on?
Spotlight on Success

CT Literacy Conference Participants



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Thank you for attending the conference!

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Please scan the QR code to provide us with feedback on your experience.



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