

# DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

## Uncovering Text Structure

Joanna P. Williams, Ph.D. • January 2011

Topic: Improving K-3 Reading Comprehension  
Practice: Focus on Text Structure

### Highlights

- Dr. Joanna Williams, professor of psychology and education at Teachers College, Columbia University, describes the rationale for teaching text structure to elementary-aged students.
- Dr. Williams discusses the difference between narrative and informational text structure.
- She also describes the Theme Scheme, an approach to teaching narrative text structure, and three strategies for teaching informational text structure: looking for clue words, asking questions, and using graphic organizers.

### About the Interviewee

Dr. Joanna P. Williams has been involved in research in the New York City Public Schools since the early 1970s. Her most recent project is an intervention to enhance expository text comprehension via text structure instruction for primary grade at-risk students. Her research is funded by the Institute for Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.

Dr. Williams holds an M.Ed. from Harvard University and a Ph.D. from Yale University. She is currently a professor of psychology and education at Teachers College, Columbia University. She has over 100 publications. She is a former editor of the *Journal of Educational Psychology* and the founding editor of *Scientific Studies of Reading*. She is the past president of the Society for Scientific Studies of Reading. She was a member of the National Reading Panel, a committee mandated by the U.S. Congress to evaluate the research evidence on reading instruction.

## Full Transcript

I'm Joanna Williams, professor of psychology and education at Teachers College, Columbia University.

It's very important to teach elementary school children, K-3, about text structure, because it's something tangible in the area of comprehension actually that we can teach. There's something there to show children, and they can learn it. Text structure helps children in their reading because it organizes the content of what they are reading. They're reading facts, they're reading pieces of information and so forth, and they need some way of structuring or organizing that information. Good text is well structured, and a child who learns about structure will have the cues available and the means to pull out those important pieces of text.

There are several basic features of narrative text. First of all, narrative texts are stories, and they talk about people and events. And so one of the most important features about a narrative or a story is: Who is it about? (The main character.) And then what did the main character do? (The central event of the story.) How did the main character feel about it? And then there's usually some sort of conflict, and a resolution of that conflict, and then a conclusion to the story.

Now, these are little pieces of the story, and they usually appear in the same sequence in a story. And what we do is teach the children those features so that they will have an understanding, on an abstract level really, of what a story consists of, and then they can look for those features when they hear a new story.

Understanding informational texts is a little different from understanding narrative texts. Children aren't usually faced with informational or expository text as soon as they are with narrative, and it's a little different because expository text is usually more difficult to understand. And the reason for that is that it's usually about abstract issues, not simply main characters and their events and so forth. So that, plus the fact that usually the language that expository text is written in is a little different, is a little more formal, it makes that kind of text, informational or expository, more of a challenge for children.

The other issue is that while there's only one narrative structure, there are several expository structures. There is compare/contrast; there is description, sequence, cause/effect, problem/solution. And there is a different structure for each one of those, and children really have to be introduced to each one separately.

Now, there are different kinds of specific tools you can use. And what I've been doing in my research is

trying to develop such tools and really build them into instructional programs.

My narrative work consists of what we call the Themes Scheme, and the Themes Scheme is a set of questions, which highlight the important information in a text. And children learn to essentially recite and use the questions as strategy questions. The first questions are about the plot level: Who was the main character? What was the main event? And that sort of thing. And then they focus in on the event and the resolution because those are the two most important parts of a story, and then they evaluate them: Was it good or was it bad?

When I work with expository text structure, it's a little different; it's a little more complicated, because, first of all, we have to choose which kind of expository structure we are teaching. And we have done several, including compare/contrast, and we have developed an instructional program where we teach three basic strategies.

There are clue words, and in compare/contrast there are *similar*, *dissimilar*, *like*, and those kinds of things. So we can use those clue words, and we teach children to find those in paragraphs, and then they know it's a compare/contrast paragraph. And then they say to themselves, "Well, how can I find the most important information in a compare/contrast paragraph?"

And our second strategy is to teach them the generic questions:

- What is this paragraph about? What two things is this about?
- How are the two things different?
- How are the two things the same?

And they answer those questions.

The third strategy is the use of a graphic organizer, because this just helps them identify and keep in mind the answers to those generic questions.

What we've found from our studies is that children really do learn from having this explicit teaching. We have found that they do better on comprehension tests that we develop, that they can read other material that they haven't seen in instruction and in the same area—social studies. And what is also very good, I think, is that they have learned just as much about the content, the social studies content, as they would have if they hadn't had any of the embedded reading comprehension training.

It's very important for children to understand that text has meaning, and if they just sound out words, they are not really, really reading. So they have to understand that they need to get meaning, and text structure is a way to get into that for them.