

**CIERA**

Center for the Improvement of  
Early Reading Achievement

# Improving Comprehension of Informational Text

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Michigan State University

## Some background: Poor achievement with informational text

- Large proportions of American students have difficulty reading and writing informational text.
- Low-income and minority students are particularly likely to struggle.
- Some have attributed the “fourth grade slump” to difficulties with informational text.
- Lower achievement in science may also be linked to difficulties with informational text.
- Nearly 44 million adults cannot extract information from text in many circumstances.

# More background: The importance of informational reading and writing

- We live in the “information age.”
- Approximately 96% of the sites on the World Wide Web are expository in form.
- The majority of reading and writing adults do is non-fiction, much of it informational.
- Academic achievement in a wide range of subjects depends in part on ability to read and write informational text.



## More background: Some benefits of informational text

- Some students actually prefer reading and writing informational text.
- Informational text may provide a “way in” to literacy for some students.

## Some topics of interest to Peter and Isaac:

Peter

Space

Animals

Machines

Oceans

(e.g., *Sea Otters*  
*Come Home, Look*  
*Out For Pirates*)

Isaac

Volcanoes

Samurai

Planets

How-to-Science

Experiments  
(e.g., “Mystery  
Minerals”)

Caswell, L. J., & Duke, N. K. (1998). Non-narrative as a catalyst for literacy development. *Language Arts*, 75, 108-117.

## Benefits of informational text, cont.

- Informational text can allow students to take advantage of background knowledge.
- Informational text can build background knowledge across the curriculum.
- Informational text can be used to capitalize on student interests.

## Some professionally successful men and women with dyslexia

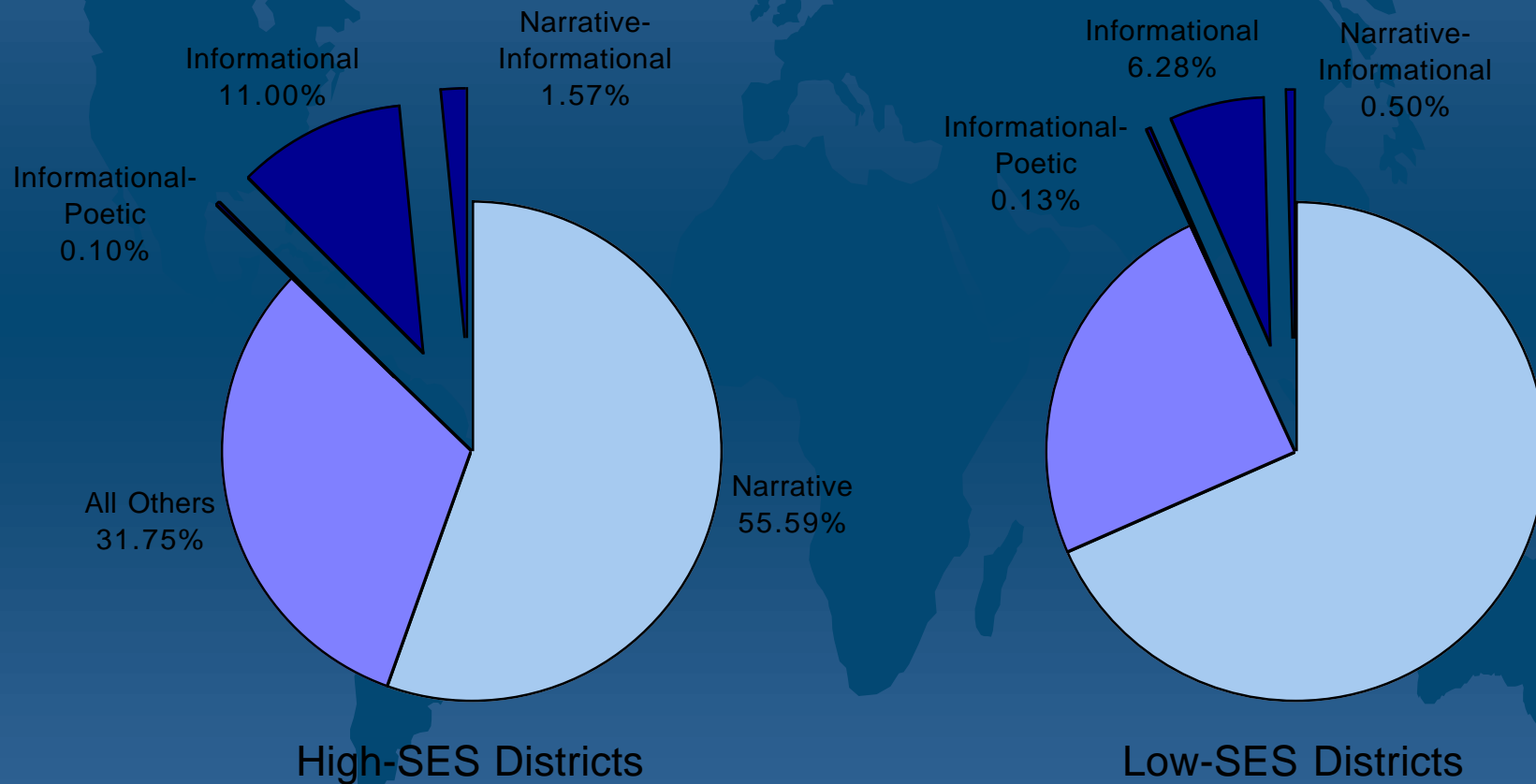
- S. Charles Bean,  
Neurologist
- Hannah Adams,  
Teacher
- William Brewer,  
Psychologist
- Jane Smith,  
Anthropologist
- Tania Baker,  
Biochemist
- Laura Brody,  
Cookbook author etc.
- Stacy Harris,  
Attorney at law
- Heriberto Cresto,  
Social worker

Fink, R. P. (1995/1996). Successful dyslexics: A constructivist study of passionate interest reading. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 38, 268-280.

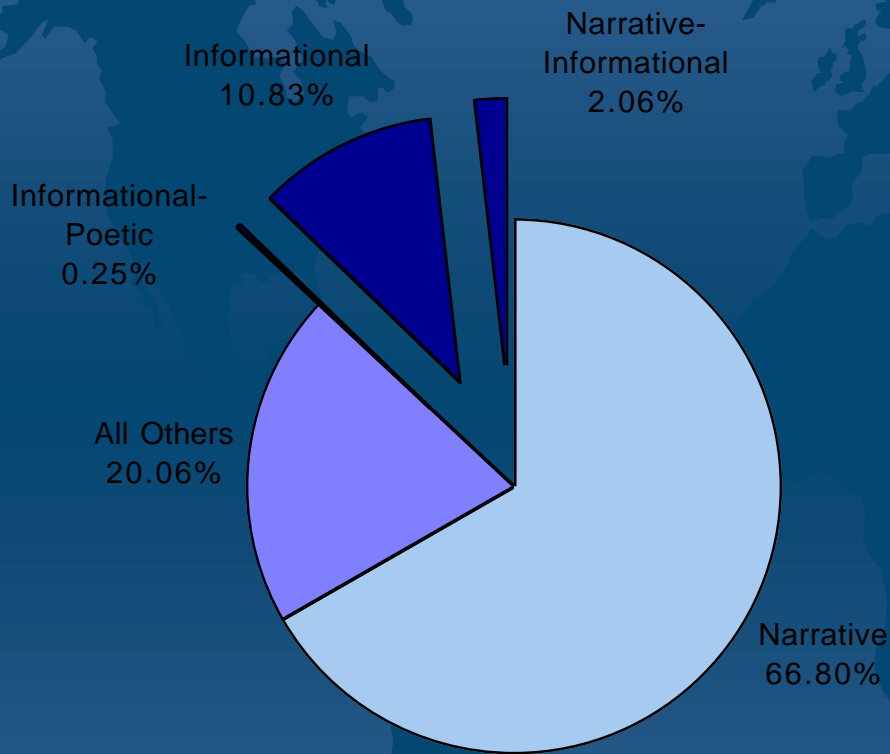
## So What Do We Do?

- Increase availability of informational text.
- Increase exposure to informational text.
- Increase instructional time with informational text.
- Increase explicit teaching of comprehension strategies, along with lots of opportunities for guided and independent practice.
- Increase attention to the unique features of informational text.
- Ensure that informational text is used for authentic purposes as much as possible.

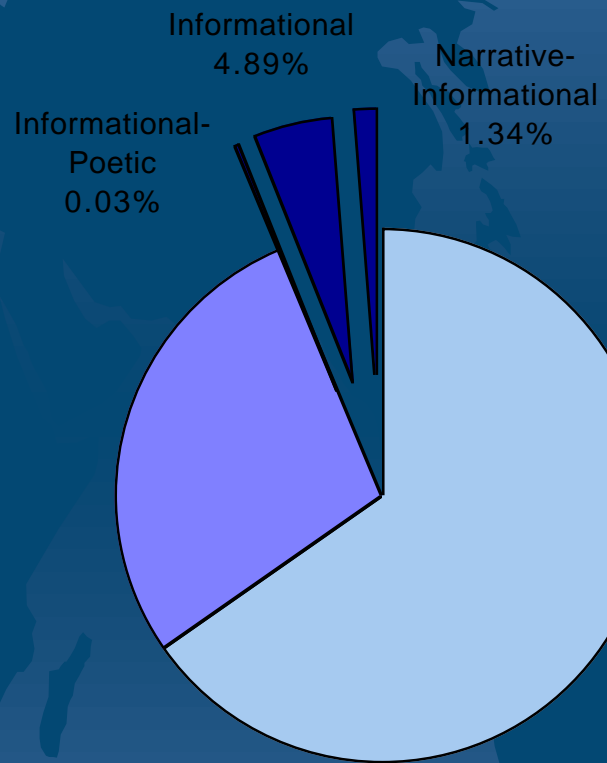
# Increase *availability* of informational text



Duke, N. K. (2000). 3.6 minutes per day: The scarcity of informational texts in first grade. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 35, 202-224.

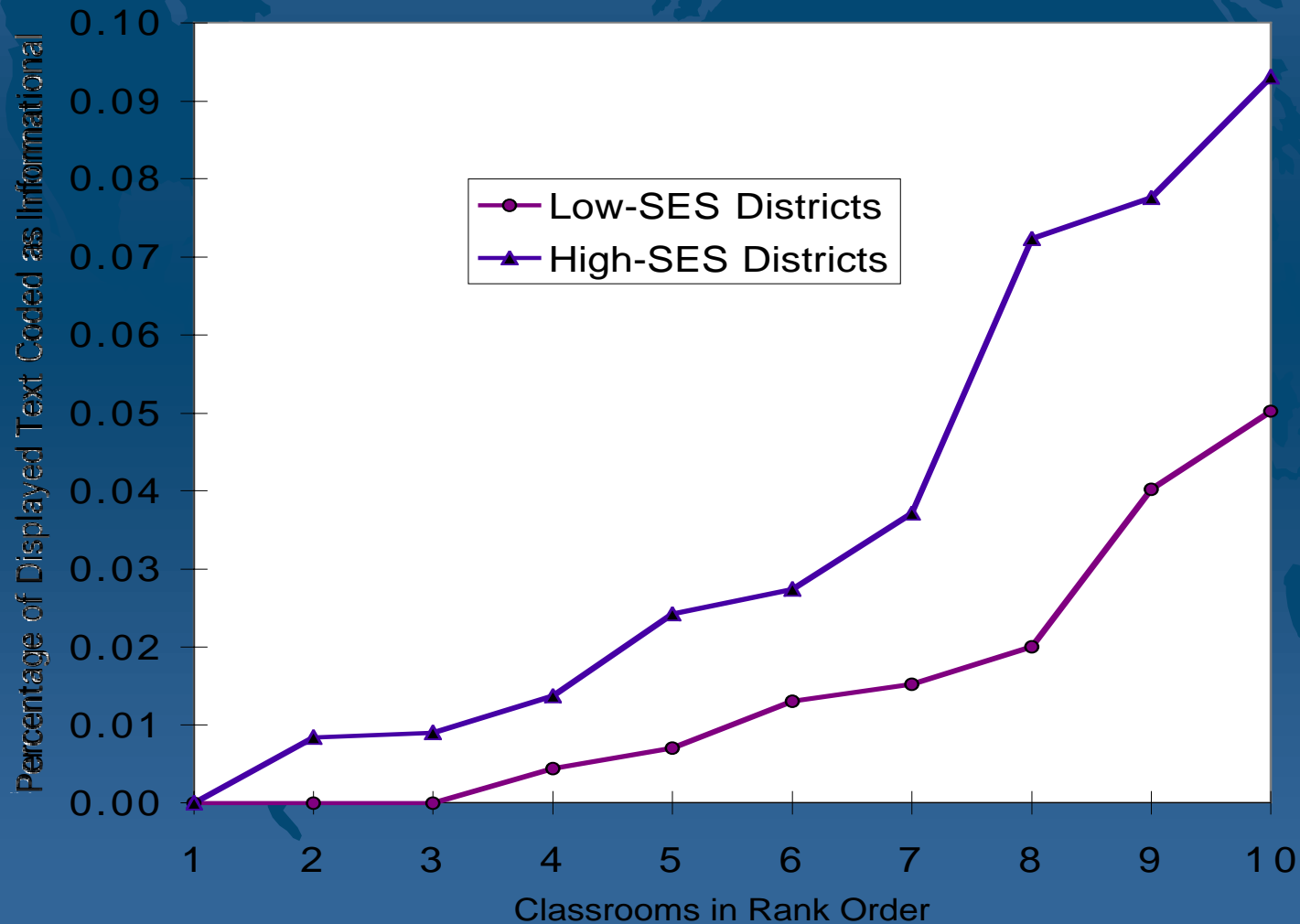


High-SES Districts

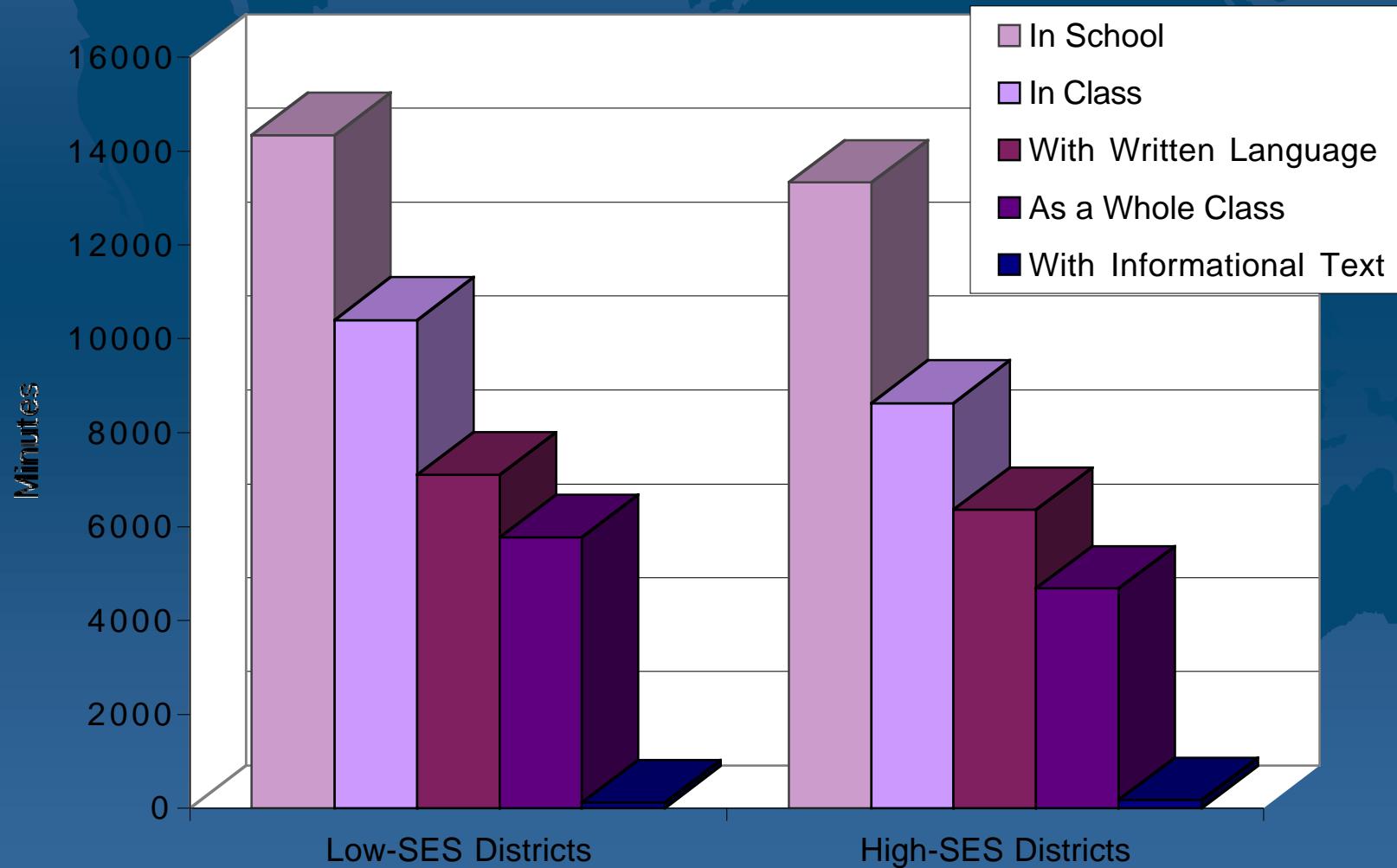


Low-SES Districts

# Increase *exposure* to informational text



# Increase *instructional time* with informational text





Increase *explicit teaching* of  
*comprehension strategies*

*Get Ready. . . This one's going  
to be really hard!!!*

# The State of Comprehension Instruction in Research

## The comprehension revolution 1970 - 1990

- New intellectual tools (psycholinguistics, cognitive science, etc.)
- An increasing recognition that there was something more to reading than decoding
- A growing body of research demonstrating what good readers do when they read, comprehension strategies worth teaching, effective approaches to comprehension strategy instruction

A dark blue world map is visible in the background of the slide, showing the continents of North America, South America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australia.

# The State of Comprehension Instruction in Practice

- Durkin's embarrassing little study (1978)
  - Some 4,000 minutes of classroom observation
  - 11 minutes devoted to comprehension instruction
  - Lots of testing and lots of questioning during discussion
- Pressley et al. work of today

# Disconnect Between Research and Practice



- The usual suspects. . .
- The overall climate. . .
  - Whole language found the tradition of explicit instruction in comprehension strategies a little too “skillsy” in feel.
  - “New phonics” was focused on word recognition and a held a ‘simple view’ of reading {  $RC = [LC * Dec]$  }.

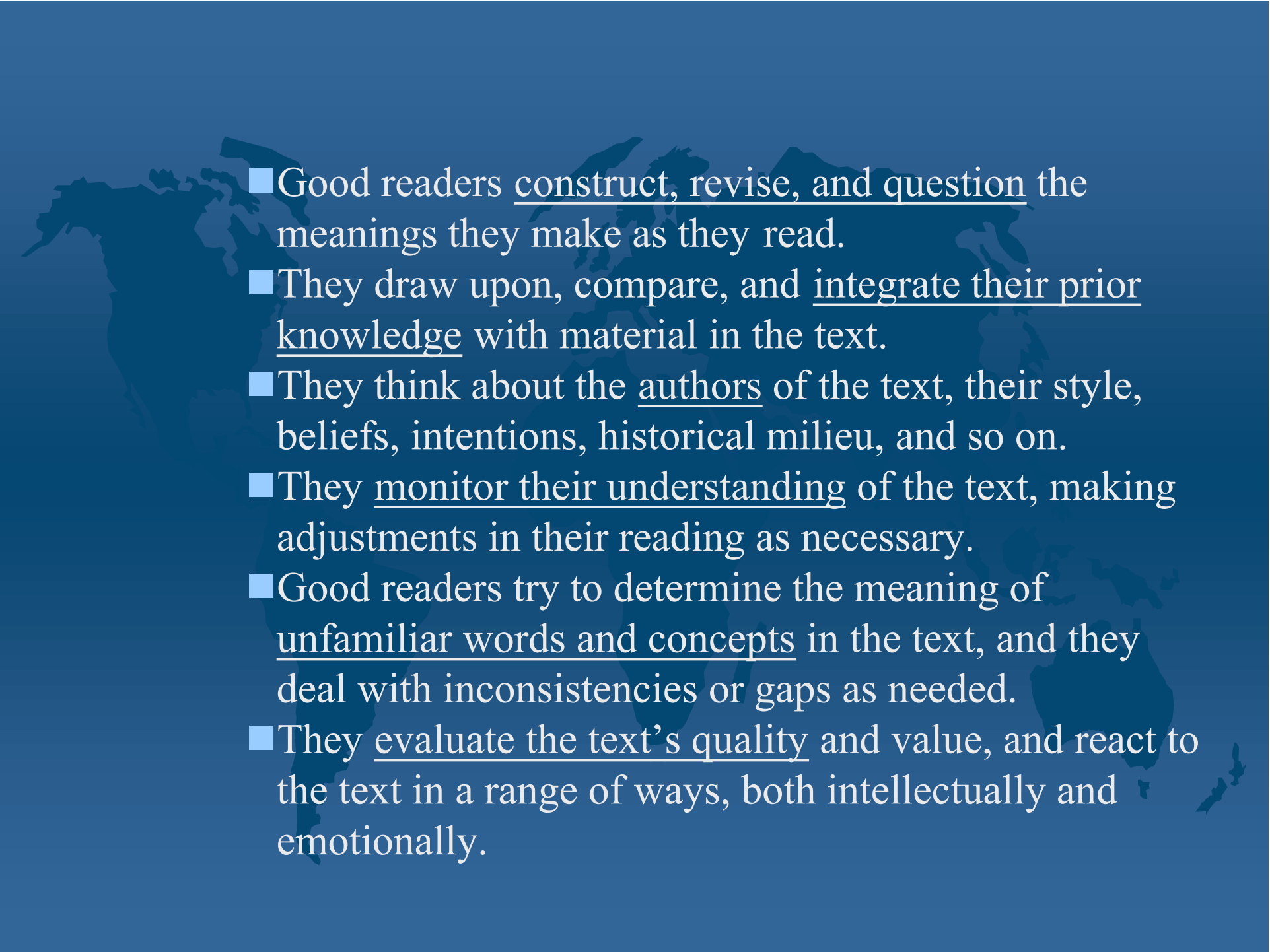
# So what does research say about comprehension strategy instruction?

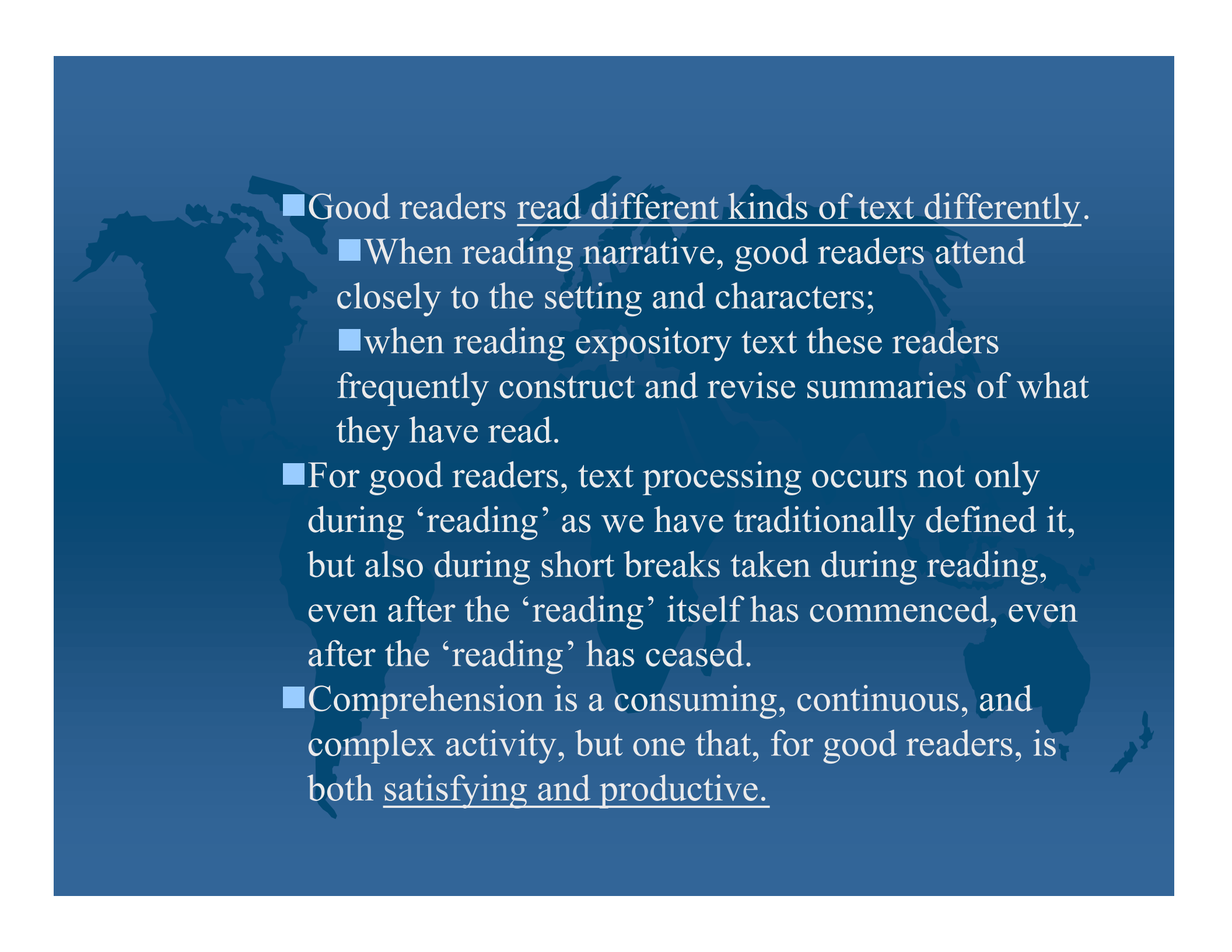
## We need:

- A goal -- what good readers do when they read
- An environment -- a supportive context for comprehension development
- A model -- an overall view of how comprehension strategies are taught and learned
- A curriculum -- which comprehension strategies will be taught, when, and how

# A Goal: What good readers do when they read

- Good readers are active readers.
- From the outset they have clear goals in mind for their reading. They constantly evaluate whether the text, and their reading of it, is meeting their goals.
- Good readers typically look over the text before they read, noting such things as the structure of the text and text sections that might be most relevant to their reading goals.
- As they read, good readers frequently make predictions about what is to come.
- They read selectively, continually making decisions about their reading--what to read carefully, what to read quickly, what not to read, what to re-read, and so on.

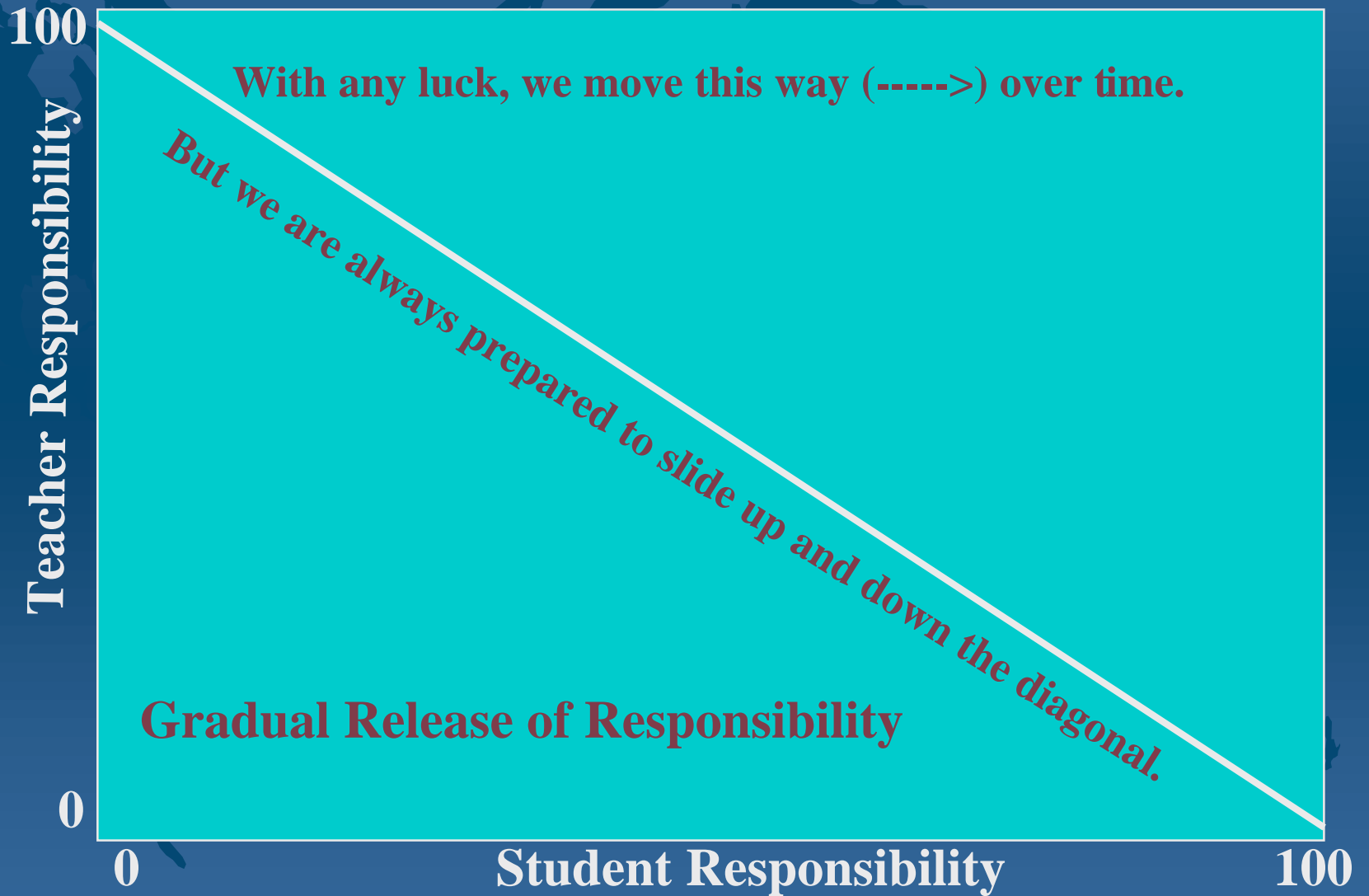
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- Good readers construct, revise, and question the meanings they make as they read.
  - They draw upon, compare, and integrate their prior knowledge with material in the text.
  - They think about the authors of the text, their style, beliefs, intentions, historical milieu, and so on.
  - They monitor their understanding of the text, making adjustments in their reading as necessary.
  - Good readers try to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words and concepts in the text, and they deal with inconsistencies or gaps as needed.
  - They evaluate the text's quality and value, and react to the text in a range of ways, both intellectually and emotionally.

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- Good readers read different kinds of text differently.
    - When reading narrative, good readers attend closely to the setting and characters;
    - when reading expository text these readers frequently construct and revise summaries of what they have read.
  - For good readers, text processing occurs not only during ‘reading’ as we have traditionally defined it, but also during short breaks taken during reading, even after the ‘reading’ itself has commenced, even after the ‘reading’ has ceased.
  - Comprehension is a consuming, continuous, and complex activity, but one that, for good readers, is both satisfying and productive.

# An Environment: A supportive context for comprehension development

- Opportunity: large amounts of time for actual text reading
- Authenticity: reading real texts for real reasons
- Range: reading THE range of text genres
- Talk: talking about text, with a teacher and one another
- Words: Conceptually driven vocabulary development
- Enabling Skills: solid base of decoding, monitoring and fluency
- Writing: writing texts for others to comprehend

# A Model: Cognitive apprenticeship



## Some key features of the model

- Demonstration by teachers: making thinking public / thinking aloud, including the what, why, when, and how of comprehension strategy use
- Guided practice / Genuine apprenticeships: a gradual release of responsibility, learning from others
- Independent use: the ultimate goal of reading comprehension strategy instruction
- Authentic texts and contexts are essential

# A Curriculum: Which comprehension strategies will be taught, when & how

- Individual Strategies

- Making predictions
- Think-alouds
- Uncovering text structure
- Summarizing
- Question-generation
- Drawing inferences
- Visual representations

- Routines or Packages

- Reciprocal Teaching
- SAIL/Transactional Strategies Instruction
- Questioning the Author

Duke, N. K., & Pearson, P. D. (in press). Effective practices for developing reading comprehension. To appear in A. E. Farstrup & S. J. Samuels (Eds.), *What Research Has to Say about Reading Instruction*. Newark, DE: IRA.

# SAIL & Transactional Strategies Instruction

Table 2: Basic Components of TSI

Cognitive Strategies	Interpretive Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Thinking aloud</li><li>• Constructing images</li><li>• <i>Summarizing*</i></li><li>• <i>Predicting (prior knowledge activation)*</i></li><li>• <i>Questioning*</i></li><li>• <i>Clarifying*</i></li><li>• Story grammar analysis</li><li>• Text structure analysis</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Character development<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Imagining how a character might feel</li><li>Identifying with a character</li></ul></li><li>• Creating themes</li><li>• Reading for multiple meanings</li><li>• Creating literal/figurative distinctions</li><li>• Looking for a consistent point of view</li><li>• Relating text to personal experience</li><li>• Relating one text to another</li><li>• Responding to certain text features, such as point of view, tone, or mood</li></ul>

\*Note: strategies in *italics* are also a part of reciprocal teaching

See, for example, Pressley, M., El-Dinary, P.B., Gaskins, I., Schuder, T., Bergman, R. L., Almasi, J., & Brown, R. (1992). Beyond direct explanation: Transactional instruction of reading comprehension strategies. *Elementary School Journal*, 92, 513-555.

# Questioning the Author

Table 3: Questions to guide the discussion in Questioning the Author

Goal	Candidate Questions
Initiate the discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What is the author trying to say?</li><li>• What is the author's message?</li><li>• What is the author talking about?</li></ul>
Help students focus on the author's message	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• That is what the author says, but what does it mean?</li></ul>
Help students link information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How does that connect with what the author already told us?</li><li>• What information has the author added here that connects to or fits in with ...?</li></ul>
Identify difficulties with the way the author has presented information or ideas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Does that make sense?</li><li>• Is that said in a clear way?</li><li>• Did the author explain that clearly? Why or why not? What's missing? What do we need to figure out or find out?</li></ul>
Encourage students to refer to the text either because they've misinterpreted a text statement or to help them recognize that they've made an inference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Did the author tell us that?</li><li>• Did the author give us the answer to that?</li></ul>

Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., Hamilton, R. L., & Kucan, L. (1997). *Questioning the author: An approach to enhancing student engagement with text*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

## Increase attention to the *unique features* of informational text

- Has a purpose to convey information about the natural or social world
- Enables nonlinear reading
- Has an index, table of contents, headings
- Diagrams, charts, graphs, captions
- Realistic illustrations, photographs
- Timeless verbs, generic nouns
- Specialized vocabulary, italicization, boldfacing
- Particular text structures

A dark blue background with a faint, lighter blue world map. The map shows the continents of North America, South America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australia. The text is overlaid on this background.

## Ensure that informational text is used for *authentic purposes*

- For pleasure and/or to pass the time
- To find out something you want or need to know
- To convey information from someone who knows it to someone who does not, yet wants or needs to do so

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