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Wesley I. Garner

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Reading and Writing; dynamic interactions in the problem solving process

by Wesley I. Garner

It has been said that "Reading is the process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interaction among the reader's existing knowledge, the information suggested by the written language and the context of the reading situation".* There is, for me, no dispute of this definition. In reading, the problem to be solved by the reader is essentially **arriving at meaning**.

To prepare for this journey, I propose, in this article, strategies to help the reader understand the dynamic interactions between reading and writing. When readers know how author's map stories in the writing process, they can effectively employ this knowledge in arriving at meaning. They can also use this mapping in their own creative writing.

Most well-written stories are mapped with four basic components. There is a central **character** who has a very specific **attribute**. This character confronts a **problem** and must find a **solution** for it in some way. The solution to the character's problem can often be predicted by the reader before his/her eyes process the end of print because the author has already given the reader a preview of the character's attribute and a sample of the character's problem. Finally, there is strict congruence between the character's attribute, the problem and the solution. That is, the story is believable because the solution fits with the other elements in the basic story map (i.e. character, attribute, problem).

Let's apply this four-part map to an actual reading situation. Below is an excerpt of "The Dip", a sample narrative text being considered as a model for the new MEAP test. Three of

the four story mapping elements are in this excerpt. See if you can identify the central **character**, the character's **attribute(s)**, and the **problem(plot)** in JUST the first paragraph and ONLY the **first** sentence of the second paragraph:

The dip, down by the abandoned beaver lodge where the stream flowed and the bare old elms rose out of ferns and brush, was Tick Merrick's place. He hugged the possession of it fiercely to himself, crossing the fields in back of his house and going there often, glad that at last he had found a place where he did not have to act tough.

Until the other kid came, that is. As soon as Tick saw her, his heart sank. For one thing, she was almost his twin. She had the same straight, shaggy hair and cowlick, the same taut scragginess of limbs and body, the same watchful brown eyes. For another, she was walking slowly, just the way he had when he had first come there. He knew that she, too, was finding a place of her own.

Was Tick Merrick the central character? Was one of his attributes selfish ("...hugged the possession of it fiercely to himself...")? What other attribute does Tick possess? When you read, "Until the other kid came, that is", did those words set the tone for a problem for Tick?

The remainder of the story is "filler" - expansions on what you, the reader already have a sense of - leading to the solution.

Most well-written stories are built on this four-part map. How can you help children recognize and use this map to guide them toward their destination of meaning? Here are some suggestions:

*State of Michigan's New Definition of Reading

1. Select a book, such as **Whistle for Willie** by Ezra Jack Keats or **Ira Sleeps Over** by Bernard Waber.
2. Read just enough for children to hear the character and his problem (in **Whistle for Willie** and **Ira Sleeps Over**, the problem is right in the beginning).
3. Elicit the character and his problem through discussion with the children. I prefer to introduce all four story map terms and write them on the chalkboard, developing information for each as the story is read and discussed.
4. Continue reading until you feel children have some evidence of the character's attribute(s). Characteristically, attributes have to be **inferred** from the author's writing. I use focused questions to help children arrive at words describing a character's attribute. I often ask, "What does Peter/Ira have to be like to solve the problem?". This line of questioning helps establish the expectation of congruence between the character's attribute as he interacts with the problem and the solution.
5. Lastly, I challenge students to predict the solution. In the case of **Ira Sleeps Over**, I might read just enough to aid their predictions before I read the solution. Then, I read the solution and we all discuss alternate ways the character could have solved his problem, given his attribute. This part of the strategy minimizes the "right answer" syndrome because children begin to learn that, as in life, many solutions are possible for a given problem.

When this exercise is over, I challenge children to use their inner eyes to "see" a problem in their own lives. I have them write that problem down beginning with the words, "tries to..." or "wants to...". Next, I have them choose a different character than themselves to give this problem to. Authors only have six character choices to write about - **boy, girl, woman, man, animal** or **thing**. "What does your character have to be like to solve the problem?", I ask. This question gets at attributes. Finally, I have children brainstorm and list all the possible ways their character could solve the problem with the attribute they chose.

This strategy is the genesis of story mapping in a writing context. Many possibilities exist for extensive story writing and I work with students to help them develop stories from these humble, yet universal, beginnings.

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Wesley I. Garner is director of Chapter I/Article 3 Services for the Bay City Public Schools. He has authored stories for children as well as articles on reading instruction and other educational topics. Currently, the reading/writing strategies he outlines above are being developed commercially by an educational publisher.

*"Do not follow where the path may lead.
Go instead where there is no path
and leave a trail."*