

Making Sense of Nonsense: Improving Reading Comprehension

A Paper Presented by
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Reading has been called “the mother of all learning”—an understandable claim when we consider how much of our knowledge we acquire through reading. Realizing that first year college students are required to read at least three times more material than high school seniors, the Reading Enhancement Program at the U.S. Air Force Academy (USAFA) focuses on various strategies designed to improve reading rate and comprehension and increase vocabulary development while enhancing critical thinking and analytical reasoning. As reading and writing instructors at USAFA, we recognize that improving our cadets’ reading skills can dramatically impact their academic achievement and enable them to become better writers and critical thinkers. In this paper, we explore two reading strategies we have found to be particularly successful in working with cadets at various stages of their academic careers: Previewing and Vocabulary Development. In Part 1, we define these two strategies and suggest techniques for introducing them into the classroom. In Part 2, we demonstrate how Previewing and Vocabulary Development can be applied to the teaching of literature by exploring these strategies within the context of Ernest Gaines’ *A Lesson Before Dying*.

Previewing enables us to activate our prior knowledge, a skill crucial to comprehending new information. Previewing involves surveying a selected passage to obtain an overview of the subject matter and identify key themes and concepts. When we Preview, we narrow the focus of our attention from an infinite number of ideas to a narrow realm of possibilities. Previewing helps us separate the wheat from the chaff and enables us to create meaningful connections that

can significantly enhance reading comprehension. Omaggio (1993) refers to previewing and vocabulary development as “advanced organizers” essential for comprehension.

At USAFA, we often compare the reader’s process of previewing a text to a pilot’s “preflight inventory.” We emphasize that when pilots prepare for take-off, they conduct a series of exercises to ensure a safe and effective flight. Flying without performing a pre-flight inventory would be unthinkable. Unfortunately, readers routinely dive into texts without preparing themselves for their impending “flight,” only to discover that their lack of preparation leaves them floundering in the text, unable to get their bearings and comprehend the author’s message. Consequently, instead of an exciting journey geared towards the discovery of new ideas and information, the reading process often becomes an arduous ordeal fraught with frustration.

To demonstrate the importance of previewing a text, we discuss a technique generally referred to as SQ3R: Survey, Question, Read, Review, and Recite. This technique, which focuses on correlating a series of questions and responses, can be adapted to a variety of reading materials from essays and articles to novels and textbooks. Its application is outlined in Part 2 of this paper.

Another important aspect of reading comprehension is vocabulary development which includes word recognition and understanding language within specific contexts. This provides readers with a basis for determining the level of difficulty of the text and prepares them for the important task ahead. Individual words build upon one another and provide the foundation for comprehension; if the foundation is weak, then the reader’s ability to access information by recognizing words and activating prior knowledge is limited. Word knowledge is a source of

power. Consequently, vocabulary development can make us better readers, writers, and critical thinkers.

However, simply understanding an author's words does not guarantee comprehension, as readers must be able to understand language in context. This concept is illustrated in the following passage:

With hocked gems financing him, he defied all scornful laughter that tried to prevent his scheme. 'Your eyes deceive', they said. 'It is like a table, not an egg.' Now three sturdy sisters sought truth. As they forged along, often over turbulent peaks and valleys, their days became weeks as many doubters spread fearful rumors about the edge. At last from nowhere, winged creatures appeared, signifying the journey's end.

If this passage does not make sense to you, don't feel bad—most people do not understand it the first time around. This account of the voyage of Christopher Columbus to the New World reflects a style from a different era. Understanding the *context* of the paragraph, however, provides insights that help us better understand its *content* (e.g., “three sturdy sisters” as the three ships of the expedition, “winged creatures” as seagulls or other birds, and so on). Consequently, analyzing the context of a passage through previewing and vocabulary development enables us to significantly improve reading comprehension.

Reading comprehension is directly linked to word recognition: the more words we know in any given content area, the better able we will be to decipher unfamiliar terminology. Similarly, using words to create a visual summary of a textual passage—creating a concept map—helps us organize information and visualize the connections between words and ideas. For example, in a scene from *The Mighty* (Miramax, 1998), a young boy is tutoring a classmate who

has difficulty reading and tells him, “every word is a part of a picture; every sentence is a picture....all you have to do is let your imagination connect them together.”

In teaching Ernest Gaines’ *A Lesson Before Dying*, instructors are likely to encounter unique challenges. Because this novel differs structurally and rhetorically from more conventional Eurocentric novels, students may be reluctant to read it, rationalizing that they “can’t relate” to the characters’ experiences and complaining that the language is foreign or “too difficult” for them to understand. But by previewing the novel and introducing students to key terms and concepts explored by the author—many rooted in cultural, ethnic, or regional customs and traditions—students can learn to appreciate this work from a cultural as well as literary perspective.

Set in the fictional community of Bayonne, Louisiana, in the pre-Civil Rights South, *A Lesson Before Dying* tells the story of Jefferson, a barely literate young black man falsely accused of killing a white storekeeper during a liquor store robbery and condemned to death by electrocution. As part of his client’s “defense,” Jefferson’s white attorney argues that Jefferson is innocent because he obviously lacks the intelligence to plan a robbery. In fact, he points out that executing Jefferson—whom he refers to as “a fool”, “a cornered animal,” and “a thing”—would be like putting a hog in the electric chair. Devastated by the defense attorney’s racist remark and determined that Jefferson will die like a man, his godmother, Miss Emma, persuades Grant Wiggins, Jefferson’s former teacher, to visit him in prison and help him regain his human dignity. Over the course of 5-1/2 months between Jefferson’s trial and execution, Grant makes numerous visits to Jefferson’s prison cell. In the end, he not only succeeds in helping Jefferson regain his manhood; he regains his own manhood and finds himself transformed from a cynical, apathetic human being to a wise and compassionate teacher.

To preview the novel, I ask students to consider four questions suggested by the title: (1) What is the lesson? (2) Who learns it? (3) Who is dying? and (4) Why should we care? I also ask them to reflect on the narrator's opening statement, "I was not there, yet I was there."

Next, lest students view the novel solely as Jefferson's (or Grant's) story, I encourage them to consider it within the context of broader themes such as freedom, human dignity, and the value of human life by presenting them with selected quotes by notable writers and historical figures, including the following quote by the author, which generally leads to animated discussion:

We all know—at least intellectually—that we're going [to die].

The difference is being told, "Okay, it's tomorrow at 10 a.m." How do you face it? That, it seems to me, is the ultimate test of life.

Finally, to illustrate that the attorney's reference to Jefferson as a "hog" exemplifies the dehumanizing language of white supremacy, I read them the following passage from Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* in which the author recounts a conversation with an elderly black man that illustrates the devastating psychological damage this type of language had on many enslaved blacks:

He said he had been born in Virginia and sold into Alabama in 1845. I asked him how many were sold at the same time. He said, "There were five of us: myself and brother and three mules."

To generate further discussion, I also provide students with a copy of Claude McKay's poem, "If We Must Die," which opens with the lines: If we must die,/ let it not be like hogs. . . ."

Armed with this preview, students should be prepared for a close, critical reading of the novel that focuses on literary elements such as plot, setting, theme, character, symbolism, and imagery as well as cultural, historical, and human rights issues such as slavery, race relations, the Civil Rights movement and the value of personal choice and moral responsibility.

To illustrate the concept of language within the context of the novel, I provide students with a list of key terms and concepts that focus on the regional language of the rural South. Further, to engage them in the exploration of other aspects of language—such as body language and the language of music, both of which play key roles in the novel—I introduce them to two types of music indigenous to the Louisiana bayou: Cajun and Zydeco. Since both styles are characterized by a blend of African and American rhythms and instruments, our discussion of music provides a segue to a discussion of language and expression, with an emphasis on dialogue, dialect, regional language and the use of standard vs. non-standard English. This, in turn, lays the groundwork for what, for most students, is the most difficult part of the novel: Jefferson’s journal, written in broken English with little regard for the conventions of Standard English in terms of spelling, grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and “correct” diction, as illustrated in the following passage:

its munday an I aint got but just a few days lef an I hope I see my
nanan jus one mo time cause mis lou and reven ambros say she
aint fairin too good an coudn make it wi them this time but the lord
kno mr wigin I hope I can see her one mo time on this earth fore I
go is that love mr wigin when you want see somebody bad bad mr

wigin thank you for sayin im doin b + work an you know the a aint
too far (Gaines 229)

Upon their initial encounter with this type of language—which provides a jarring contrast to the rest of the novel—students are likely to dismiss it as “nonsense.” But once they become familiar with the cadence and rhythm of the language by reading it out loud and we discuss the fact that, in his journal, Jefferson speaks in his own voice for the first time, expressing his innermost thoughts and feelings, students begin to appreciate Gaines’ skillful use of characterization through language. To further emphasize the stylistic elements of language and to disabuse students of the notion that the use of non-standard, seemingly nonsensical language appears only in the works of so-called “minority” writers, I also share with them the following passage from James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. (I find this strategy especially effective since, during the course of their reading of Gaines’ novel, students have already been exposed to Joyce’s *Dubliners*.):

Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a
moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was
down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo. . .

His father told him that story: his father looked at him
through a glass: he had a hairy face.

He was baby tuckoo. (Joyce 3)

To summarize, I point out that Jefferson’s journal symbolizes writing as a powerful act of affirmation and self-creation that enables individuals to document their stories and write themselves into history, a remarkable accomplishment, especially for the descendants of a people who were legally forbidden to write, often under penalty of death.

By focusing on Previewing and Vocabulary Development to enhance reading comprehension, the USAFA Reading Program has provided cadets with the tools necessary to meet the rigorous demands of an Air Force career, echoing the program's motto: "Better Readers are Better Leaders."

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