# Transcript: Teaching Content is Teaching Reading

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**Note:** This is the text version of the visual-only video—[Teaching Content is Teaching Reading](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RiP-ijdxqEc)—in the PLC Session 4 Slide Presentation.

You have heard…

* If you can read, you can learn anything.
* “Reading is the key that opens doors.”
* “Reading is power.”

But what do you need to know in order to read?

* C sounds like /c/
* A sounds like /a/
* T sounds like /t/

## Letter Sound Translations

Main entry: cat

Pronunciation \’kat\

Function: noun

Usage: Often attributive

Etymology: Middle English, from Old English catt, probably from Late Latin cattus, catta cat

Date: Before 12th century

Letter sound translation are obvious.

## Meaning

What about meaning?

* 1a: a carnivorous mammal *(Felis catus*) long domesticated as a pet and for catching rats and mice.
* 1b: any of a family (Felidae) of carnivorous usually solitary and nocturnal mammals (as the domestic cat, lion, tiger, leopard, jaguar, cougar, wildcat, lynx, and cheetah.
* 2: a malicious woman
* 3: a strong tackle used to hoist an anchor to the cathead of a ship

The cat is on the mat.

The feline is on the mat.

## Vocabulary and Knowledge

It’s obvious you need vocabulary. But you need to know more than vocabulary to read with understanding. You need knowledge of the world.

Why?

### Reason #1 Bridging Gaps

People leave out information when they write. They expect that your knowledge will fill the blanks.

#### Example 1

Try this.

“I didn't even order that boo, but the postman left it on my porch in the rain so now I guess I’m stuck with it.”

* Idea 1= Don’t want the wet book
* Idea 2= I must keep the book

What’s the connection between the two ideas?

Your knowledge goes here (between idea 1 and idea 2):

* Books are ruined when wet.
* Stores do not allow return of ruined merchandise

You bring the knowledge to connect these ideas…

#### Example 2

Try another.

“This brain scan is fuzzy, so I think the patient was wearing makeup.”

Say what?

* **Idea 1**: The brain scan is fuzzy
* **Ideas 2:** The patient wore makeup

Brain scan uses magnets, so metal makes images fuzzy. Makeup contains trace amounts of makeup. Without your knowledge, these two ideas don’t connect.

### Reason #2 Resolving Ambiguity

Much of what we read would be ambiguous if we didn’t have prior knowledge.

#### Example 1

Try this sample paragraph:

The procedure is actually quite simple. First you arrange items into different groups. Of course one pile may be sufficient depending on how much there is to do. If you have to go somewhere else due to lack of facilities that is the next step; otherwise, you are pretty well set. It is important not to overdo things. That is, it is better to do too few things at once than too many.

Say what? Why is this tricky? You know the vocabulary. Each sentence is easy to understand.

That paragraph was about washing clothes. Now that you know that, try again:

The procedure is actually quite simple. First you arrange items into different groups. Of course one pile may be sufficient depending on how much there is to do. If you have to go somewhere else due to lack of facilities that is the next step; otherwise, you are pretty well set. It is important not to overdo things. That is, it is better to do too few things at once than too many.

Your knowledge about laundry makes the ambiguous sentences comprehensible. Without that knowledge, you’d never understand, even though you know the vocabulary.

#### Example 2

Usually it’s not a block of text that’s ambiguous, it’s a sentence or phrase.

The hunter said “There’s a grouse across that field, maybe 100 yards away.” His friend said “Well, shoot.”

This sentence (Well, shoot) **does not** mean “fire your gun.”

##### Background Knowledge

* Shotguns aren’t accurate at 100 yards.
* A grouse that has flown from cover is gone.
* “Well, shoot” means “too bad. We missed it.”

Knowledge matters to reading!

### Some Data from an Experiment

According to a standard reading test for junior high school students:

* Half are “good readers”
* Half are poor readers

In each group:

* Half know a lot about baseball
* Half know only a little

The students read a story describing a baseball game. Periodically they must stop and show on a game board what has happened.

So who understood the story? The kids the reading test said were “good readers” or the kids who knew a lot about baseball?

* “Good readers” who didn’t know baseball got 18.8 items correct out of 40 possible.
* “Poor readers” who knew baseball got 27.5 items correct out of 40 possible.

Knowing the subject makes you a “good reader!”

The effect has been observed with knowledge other than baseball. For example the circulatory system, photocopiers, Vietnam War.

## General Cultural Knowledge

So who are “good readers?”

People who know a bit of everything, so they know something about whatever comes up on a reading test! General cultural knowledge correlates about 0.50 with reading comprehension test scores! 0.50 correlation? That’s about the correlation between parents’ heights and their children’s heights. That’s a big correlation.

So how is a student supposed to learn all this knowledge?

### Pop Quiz

#### Social Studies

What percentage of class time goes to social studies in US first grade classrooms?

1. 2%
2. 8%
3. 12%
4. 17%

The answer is a: 2%.

#### Science

What percentage of class time goes to science in the US first grade classrooms?

1. 4%
2. 8%
3. 12%
4. 16%

The answer is a: 4%.

#### Third-Grade Social Studies and Science

That’s first grade. Third grade is not much different. Social studies is about 5% and Science is also about 5%.

#### Language Arts

What percentage of time goes to language arts?

* First grade: 62%
* Third grade: 47%

#### Reading Strategies

Where does all that time go? Too much goes to reading strategies. Finding the main idea. Activate prior knowledge. Identify the author’s purpose.

Experiments show:

1. Reading strategies do help.
2. But it’s a one-time boost. Practicing reading strategies doesn’t help!
3. There’s no point in spending more than 10 lessons on them, tops.

#### Example 1

England’s openers labored 34 balls before scoring their first boundary as Strauss cracked two fours through the leg side. Cook made a patient start before motoring past his skipper.

If you don’t have prior knowledge of cricket, no strategy is going to help you.

## Summary

1. Once students learn decoding, they can decode anything.
2. But they can’t understand anything they read. Comprehension requires prior knowledge.
3. Attempts to boost comprehension through reading strategies alone will
* Use reading materials that reach something about the world!
* Don’t neglect other subjects.
* Teaching science is teaching reading.
* Teaching history is teaching reading.
* Teaching geography is teaching reading.
* Teaching music is teaching reading.
* Teaching art is teaching reading.
* Teaching civics is teaching reading.
* Teaching theater is teaching reading.
* Teaching content is teaching reading.

## References

[www.danielwillingham.com](http://www.danielwillingham.com) for reference supporting the claims made here, video download.

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