

# What Did Abigail

*The ability to analyze the author's purpose and perspective is just as essential as literal and inferential comprehension.*

**Gwynne Ellen Ash**

**A**lthough we sometimes assume otherwise, our adolescents' lives are filled with text. It's true that 15- to 24-year-olds in the United States spend an average of just eight and one-half minutes each day reading books, magazines, and newspapers for pleasure, four to seven minutes less than their middle-aged parents and teachers do (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005). But such print-based materials are no longer the only kind of text available. Young people spend three (girls) to six (boys) times more leisure time interacting with text on the computer than they do reading print materials (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005). Taking into consideration time spent reading texts in school and for other educational pursuits, young people actually spend more time engaged with text (print-based and digital) than their older counterparts do.

If adolescents spend so much time reading, are public concerns about their comprehension skills unfounded? Perhaps not. Reading researcher Donna Alvermann (2001) argued that although three-fourths of adolescents can read at a *basic* level, only 3 percent of 8th graders and 6 percent of 12th graders can read at an *advanced* level, characterized by extension of meaning and critical analysis. The great majority

of students have not acquired the critical and analytic reading skills required to be fully literate in the 21st century.

To develop these proficiencies, middle and high school students need more from literacy instruction than learning to read words for literal meaning. We should engage middle and high school students in comparing, synthesizing, and analyzing complex texts, says Alvermann. Research suggests that these students are capable of doing so, with the support of knowledgeable, skilled teachers (Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, & Hurwitz, 1999).

## **Defining Good Reading**

In the 1980s, reading experts began studying what good readers do. Research comparing novice and expert readers suggested that the latter engage in certain behaviors while they read: comparing prior knowledge with information in the text, asking questions, inferring information not provided in the text, and summarizing (Pearson, Roehler, Dole, & Duffy, 1992). Research on good readers led to the development of reading frameworks and strategies to help novice readers mimic what good readers do, thus improving their comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000).

In the 1990s, however, some researchers and practitioners began to suggest that the "good reader" strate-

gies, although important elements of text understanding, would not ensure full critical and analytic literacy. Effective readers practice four roles seamlessly:

■ *As code breakers*, good readers decode the words and grasp the text's literal meaning. They understand how print works and use numerous strategies to read unknown words, find the meanings of difficult words and phrases, and make sense of ideas and concepts.

■ *As meaning makers*, good readers interact with the text. They use personal and background knowledge to make text connections, make predictions and revise them as they read, make inferences, ask questions, summarize the text, synthesize ideas and information, and monitor comprehension.

■ *As text users*, good readers decide how to use the text and the meaning they gain from the text. They set a clear purpose for reading, create or identify a method of expressing what they have learned while reading, and understand that different reading situations call for different kinds of reading and expression.

■ *As text analysts*, good readers analyze the text with a critical eye. They identify the author's purpose and point of view, and they accept or resist the author's implied message (Freebody & Luke, 1990, adapted by Ash, in press).

# Mean?

By keeping these four roles in mind, we expand the meaning of reading comprehension. Advanced readers not only achieve literal and inferential understanding but also understand their purpose for reading the text and reflect on the author's point of view.

An example from a high school American History class illustrates how students can practice the skills of a good reader. In this lesson, students studied a series of letters exchanged by John and Abigail Adams during the spring of 1776. Many historians see Abigail's letters as attempts to convince her husband that the future independent nation should protect the rights of women and John's responses as a defense of the rights of men to govern their own households.

After being assigned the first letter—from Abigail to John, written on March 31, 1776—students began to perform the roles of good readers. As *code breakers*, students not only decoded the words but also applied such strategies as analyzing archaic phrases for meaning (“I long to hear . . .”) or using contextual clues to identify the meaning of unknown words (“we are determined to foment a rebellion . . .”). As *meaning makers*, they tried to identify Abigail's main argument: that a country freeing itself from tyranny should not impose tyranny on some of its own citizens. As *text users*, students thought about the



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purpose of the text; they questioned whether Abigail's letter was meant to be public or was only written for intimate communication. They also considered the purpose of studying the text in their history class and concluded that it taught them that women's rights were considered and discussed, although not commonly accepted, in early America. Finally, as *text analysts*, students thought about Abigail's playful tone in her letter: Was she teasing her husband about ideas she knew he would never accept, or was she using a playful tone to introduce ideas that might be seen as scandalous? Students also predicted what John's response might be. Finally, students considered how Abigail's position in society might have influenced her ability to produce such a text. They perceived that Abigail's arguments were indulged because she was an affluent white woman, but they wondered whether there was any evidence of women of other social classes or races making such arguments at the time. After considering the information gained through all of their roles—as well as their knowledge of American history—the students discussed the extent to which the letter represented common beliefs about gender roles in Revolutionary America.

If they had merely used good reading strategies focused primarily on literal and inferential understanding, these students might have gotten the gist of the letter—that tyranny is tyranny no matter how imposed. This literal and inferential reading might have produced *basic* understanding, but would it have fostered *advanced* literacy? In contrast, the critical and analytic process described here pushed students to consider why they were using a primary source, what they



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might do with the information, and how the person who wrote the letter was able to express a particular perspective.

Many leaders in adolescent literacy have recognized that reading instruction in middle and high schools should be based on this broader concept of comprehension. Freebody and Luke describe students' development of critical and analytical skills as "crucial to an understanding of successful reading in our culture" (1990, p. 14). But the question remains: How can teachers guide their students in analytical and critical reading?

### Expanding Comprehension

As a former middle school teacher and current teacher educator and professional development consultant, I wondered how we could incorporate Freebody and Luke's expanded definition of good readers into effective reading instruction. Between 1998 and 2001, while working with groups of middle school teachers, I began to tinker with new ways of using reciprocal teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984), a framework for helping students use the strategies of good readers while working together in small, heterogeneous, peer-led groups.

Research supports reciprocal teaching as an effective strategy in improving comprehension instruction (National Reading Panel, 2000). Used in a variety of content areas and with a variety of texts, reciprocal teaching focuses on four strategies: *predicting*, *clarifying*, *questioning*, and *summarizing*. In *predicting*, students think about what might happen in the reading, make predictions, and then monitor their reading to see whether the text supports or calls into question their predictions. In *clarifying*, students identify words, phrases, or ideas that they find confusing and discuss them with their peers. In *questioning*, students take on the role of teacher, developing questions that they believe will help evaluate whether their peers understood the reading. Finally, in *summarizing*, students identify main points or events and supporting details in the text, crafting and revising their summaries as they continue to read.

In the beginning, the teacher models reciprocal teaching with the students, demonstrating the process he or she uses to understand the text by using the four parts of the framework. In stages, the teacher moves the students toward using the strategies in peer-led small groups or pairs.

My adapted version of this effective strategy is called *Reciprocal Teaching Plus* (Ash, 2002). In addition to using the original four strategies, Reciprocal Teaching Plus asks students to address a fifth element, which encompasses evaluating a text critically, identifying the author's perspective, and analyzing what points of view are left out of the current text. Teachers can use the following prompts to help students think about this fifth element.

■ Whose story is being told? What is

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the perspective of the author or narrator?

■ Does the author believe certain things about the story/topic/world? How can you tell? Does the author or narrator tell us about these beliefs directly, or do we need to guess on the basis of clues?

■ Whose story is *not* being told? Why? Would some people disagree with the author's or narrator's beliefs or arguments? What might they believe or argue instead?

■ Do you agree or disagree with the things that the author would like you to believe? Why?

In preparing her class for Reciprocal Teaching Plus, a 9th grade English teacher explained each of the five strategies and modeled using the strategies both individually and together. After giving students extended practice and coaching in integrating the five strategies, the teacher placed students in small, heterogeneous groups of four to six students to read and analyze "The Ransom of Red Chief," a short story by O. Henry.

Before they began reading, one student who had been designated as the "teacher" solicited predictions about

the story. Another student offered, "The word *ransom* makes me think that there might be someone held hostage or kidnapped." The other students in the group recorded the prediction and offered their own. The peer teacher reminded them to think about these predictions as they read, revisiting and revising them.

The students then silently read a section of the story. As they read, they noted any words or ideas that needed clarification and crafted a brief summary of the section. In addition, they wrote one or two "teacher questions" and noted their ideas about the author's perspective.

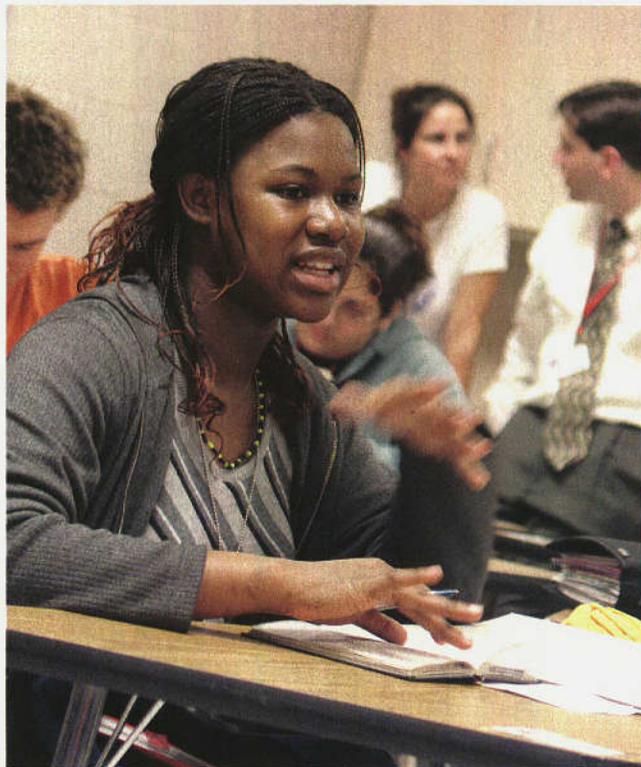
When the students finished reading the section, the peer teacher led them in a discussion. First, students shared the words, phrases, or ideas that needed clarification. For example, when one student read the word *flannel-cake* in the phrase "flat as a flannel-cake," she wrote, "I don't know what a flannel-cake is; however, I am guessing that it is very flat because it is used as a comparison in the sentence." For each point of clarification, the group decided how they might seek outside information if they were unable to come to an understanding on their own.

Next, the peer teacher offered to summarize the reading so far. "Two men, the narrator and Billy, are in Summit, Alabama, and plan to kidnap the son of Ebenezer Dorset and hold him for ransom because they need money." He invited the other group members to add to or challenge the summary. For example, he asked whether there was any important information that he had missed or any information that could be left out. Other group members shared their summaries as well.

After summarizing, the peer teacher revisited the predictions, asking group members to revise them as needed. He said, "Well, we predicted that there might be a hostage or kidnapping, and there has been a kidnapping of a young boy." He then asked the group to make predictions about what might happen in the next section.

Finally, the student teacher asked the group members to share and discuss their "teacher questions," which focused on critically evaluating the text. He asked the group to think about the author's viewpoint: "What do you think is the author's perspective toward the child in this story? Toward the kidnappers? How might this perspective affect the way we read the story?" Another student asked, "Why did the kidnappers think that the kidnapping would be an easy task?" Another commented, "The narrator has an interesting tone. What does the tone tell us about the narrator?" A third asked, "What conflicting points of view have we seen in the story so far?" Following the discussion, the peer teacher designated the next stopping point, the group resumed reading, and the cycle began again.

Although this small-group exchange might seem quite sophisticated, it emerged because the classroom teacher had spent considerable time teaching students the process of reciprocal teaching and giving them practice as a whole class. The goal of Reciprocal



## Reciprocal Teaching Plus uses peer discussion to clarify students' understanding.

Teaching Plus, like that of reciprocal teaching, is to use peer discussion to supplement and clarify students' understanding and thus move them toward independent reading.

### Moving Students Toward Independence

Reciprocal Teaching Plus is only one possible framework that might be used to support students' literal, inferential, and critical comprehension of text. Whichever instructional frameworks teachers use to help students develop

their roles as code breakers, meaning makers, text users, and text analysts, it is important to provide ongoing, independent practice in performing these roles. Garner (1990) identified three stages that students go through in learning strategies of all kinds. Students have *declarative knowledge* when they can describe the strategy and its purpose; they have *procedural knowledge* when they can use a strategy on demand; and they have *conditional knowledge* when they can analyze a situation and select a strategy that appropriately meets their needs. Students will most likely develop declarative knowledge through explicit instruction and modeling by the teacher, procedural knowledge through guided practice, and conditional knowledge through independent practice and use of the strategy.

I have heard many teachers puzzle over their students' performances on tests. These teachers say, "I know they can do it; they've done it in class many times. But when it comes to the test, they just don't do it." This phenomenon probably indicates that students have not achieved conditional knowledge—they can use the strategy on demand, but they have not yet learned why and when that strategy might be useful to them as readers.

The lesson for educators? Students need continuing independent practice, reflection on their practice, feedback from others, and ongoing strategy use to move beyond literal and inferential

reading comprehension and to achieve the advanced literacy skills needed in the 21st century. **EL**

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**Gwynne Ellen Ash** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Texas State University, San Marcos, Texas; 512-245-8068; [gwynne@txstate.edu](mailto:gwynne@txstate.edu).

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