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# STORY STRUCTURE IN BASAL READERS

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Aristotle stressed the importance of studying the elements used in literature and public speaking, such as cadence, style, content, and structure. Aristotle believed that the identification and use of effective conventional patterns by authors, speakers, readers, and listeners would aid communication. This ancient idea has been popularized by recent investigators who have described and examined the effects of story grammars (Mandler & Johnson, 1977; Rumelhart, 1975; Stein & Glenn, 1979; Thorndyke, 1977). While modern story grammars differ slightly from one another, each is an attempt to capture the intuitive notions that people have about the elements and sequence that essentially constitute a well constructed narrative. The results of recent studies have shown that children and adults do predict, comprehend, and remember better when they process stories that conform to story grammars (Fredricksen, 1975; Kintsch, 1974; Mandler, 1978; Mandler & Johnson, 1977; Rumelhart, 1975; Stein, 1976; Stein & Glenn, 1975, 1977a, '77b, '79; Whaley, 1981).

Since an understanding of narrative story structure can be beneficial, teachers should ensure that they make students aware of the structure of stories. Teachers should encourage students to recognize story structure in models and to use story structure when they produce stories. Exposing students to exemplary models is particularly important. The question remains, however, whether teachers do select well constructed stories to present to students.

Shannon (1982) and Durkin (1978-79; '83) reported that teachers rely heavily on commercial materials for reading instruction. Basal series, in particular, are utilized. If the stories in basal readers illustrate conventional story structure, then it could be concluded that teachers are

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exposing students to well constructed stories. Unfortunately, little evaluation has been made in this area. As a result, the purpose of the present investigation was to evaluate two basal reading series to determine whether their stories satisfied the requirements of a conventional story grammar.

### Methodology

In this investigation, the story grammar proposed by Prince (1973) was selected. Prince described a well constructed narrative story as one **which** minimally consists of three conjoined events. The events appear in chronological order and are connected by three explicit or inferred conjunctive features. The first and third events are stative, while the second is active. The third event is the inverse of the first. Practically speaking, a narrative story must have a beginning that presents **a problem and** a middle where action is taken that causes the resolution which is stated in the end.

Two frequently used basal series, the Houghton Mifflin Reading Program (1983) and the Scott, Foresman Reading Program (1985), were selected for evaluation. All readers from the first grade level through the eighth grade level were read and evaluated. Texts written for the pre-primer and primer levels were not evaluated, since they rarely intend to portray complete stories due to inherent restrictions in vocabulary and length. Poems, articles, skill lessons, and plays, were not evaluated since they are not narrative stories.

Table 1                      Houghton Mifflin

Entry Category	<u>N</u>	MetGrammar
Stories	235	213 (91%)
Poems	116	-
Articles	178	-
Skill Lessons	76	-
Plays	11	-
	Total	616

Table 2 Scott, Foresman Reading Program

Entry Category	<u>N</u>	Met Grammar
Stories	251	217 (87%)
Poems	109	-
Articles	149	-
Skill Lessons	181	-
Plays	12	-
Total	<u>702</u>	

Results

Table 1 reports the number of stories, poems, articles, skill lessons, and plays in the Houghton Mifflin series, and the number and percentage of narrative stories which met the story grammar. Table 2 reports the same information for the Scott, Foresman series.

Tables 3 and 4 report the number and percentage of stories which satisfied the requirements of the grammar by reader.

Table 3 - Houghton Mifflin Reading Series

Text	Grade Level	Met Grammar
Sunshine	1	8/12 (67%)
Moonbeams	2	6/10 (60%)
Skylights	2	11/16 (69%)
Towers	3	13/15 (87%)
Spinners	3	16/19 (84%)
Weavers	4	15/17 (88%)
Gateways	4	25/27 (100%)
Banners	5	27/27 (100%)
Beacons	6	25/25 (100%)
Emblems	7	35/35 (100%)
Awards	8	32/32 (100%)

Table 4 - Scott, Foresman Reading Series

Text	Grade Level	Met Grammar
Hang On To Your Hats	1	14/20 (70%)
Kick Up Your Heels	1	16/22 (73%)
Rainbow Showers	2	14/19 (74%)
Crystal Kingdom	2	13/16 (81%)
Hidden Wonders	3	14/18 (78%)
Golden Secrets	3	16/21 (76%)
Sea Treasures	4	22/27 (82%)
Sky Climbers	5	26/26(100%)
Star Flight	6	27/27(100%)
Sun Spray	7	25/25(100%)
Moon Canyon	8	30/30(100%)

#### Discussion

Narrative stories accounted for 38 percent of the entries in the Houghton Mifflin series and 36 percent in the Scott, Foresman series. These data reveal that various rhetorical patterns need to be learned so that students can effectively comprehend the entries in basal readers. Publishers should be praised for providing such variety. Researchers and teachers must remember to consider rhetorical patterns in addition to narrative structures.

Tables 3 and 4 reveal some variance across grade levels in the percentage of narratives which satisfied the story grammar. In general, the percentage increases as grade level increases. Future investigations might be conducted to determine if this is caused by restrictions placed upon authors due to vocabulary, sentence structure, content, length, and/or other variables.

Ninety-one percent of the narratives in the Houghton Mifflin series satisfied the requirements of the story grammar, while 87 percent of the narratives in the Scott, Foresman series satisfied the requirements. These figures

are impressive. When a story failed to satisfy the grammar, it was usually due to one of two reasons: the inclusion of only two events, or the failure of the second event to cause the third event. Simple descriptive passages and passages which enumerated a series of events, like the activities in a child's day, did not qualify as well constructed narrative stories. Yet, it should be noted that all passages, except one, were judged to be clear and comprehensible, even when they did not satisfy the grammar. Surprisingly, the only poorly written passage appeared in both series.

In conclusion, it appears that teachers who use the Houghton Mifflin and Scott, Foresman readers are primarily exposing their students to narrative stories with a consistent, conventional structure that can serve as an appropriate model.

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