The importance of background knowledge in reading

Supporting all readers in the secondary school

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May 2025
Final version

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Overview

This document contains…
Slides that could be used as part of a CPD sequence for teachers in school, supporting understanding of reading in secondary schools

Points to consider when using this resource
The resources in this series are intended as a companion piece to the DfE's series of training videos and guidance *Supporting all readers in secondary school*, providing additional detail. This resource expands on ideas shared in video 7, *Activating background knowledge* and provides links to research.

The importance of background knowledge

Knowledge of the world

In this example, shared by Daniel T Willingham in Why Don't Students Like School?, the reader brings a huge amount of real-world knowledge to their understanding of the situation:

- Beds have bouncy mattresses

- Trampolines are toys for bouncing on

- Children like bouncing

- Children are sometimes disobedient

- Bouncing on beds causes knocking on the floor

- In an apartment building or block of flats, knocking on the floor disturbs downstairs neighbours

- Flats are often rented rather than owned

- A building manager runs blocks of flats (USA specific)

- Renters can be evicted or asked to move

"I can't convince my boys that their beds aren't trampolines. The building manager is pressuring us to move to the ground floor."

Willingham, D. T. (2009). Why Don't Students Like School?: A Cognitive Scientist Answers Questions About How the Mind Works and What It Means for the Classroom. Jossey-Bass

Background knowledge

- Personal experiences
- Understanding of human nature and emotions
- What we have seen
- What we have done
- Where we have been
- What prior knowledge we have of the topic
- What we have studied
- What similar texts we have read
- What we can visualise
- What connections we can make

Positioning reading within sequences

- More challenging texts can be placed effectively towards the end of a sequence of teaching once pupils have:

  - secured understanding of the main concepts

  - seen visual images or had experience of physical processes linked to the key content

  - secured vocabulary knowledge relevant to the content

- More straightforward texts can be used effectively to introduce a topic or with a higher requirement for independent reading

Background knowledge and knowledge of vocabulary

Subject-specific texts are often filled with the terminology used by experts. There is often a significant crossover between vocabulary knowledge and content knowledge.

- Check the vocabulary and concepts that pupils need to be familiar with – frequently tier 3 vocabulary

- Provide glossaries or illustrations of key terms

- Use diagrams and teacher explanation to provide enough clarity to make sense of the text.

For example:

If reading about Andy Warhol's artwork in a book that assumes some knowledge of art, students would benefit from some or all of the following knowledge:

- images of Warhol's work, especially the pieces referenced in the text

- understanding of the processes of production used by Warhol, such as screenprinting

- where and when Warhol was working, and what the references to popular culture that he uses link to (eg the celebrities portrayed in his images)

The vocabulary grid prepared provides prompts for much of this material.

This challenging text would work well after a unit studying Warhol's work.

Hodge, S. (2012). *Why Your Five-Year-Old Could Not Have Done That: Modern Art Explained.* Prestel Publishing

| Using **screenprint** and other commercial art-making practices	by using the commercial process of **silkscreen** to render the image	This Pop art **icon** is one of the most recognised images from the 20th century	Warhol was confronting established beliefs about art… in both **high and low culture**
Warhol's **iconography** of celebrity and commercialism	**synthetic polymer paint** on canvas	Pop art developed from **Dada**	and in opposition to **Abstract Expressionism**
traditional **fine art** in which artists' skills and personalities were integral to their work	the **movement** became internationally renowned	allowed unlimited **reproduction**	could almost have been made from a **painting-by-numbers** kit

Background knowledge for literature

- Consider carefully how much background knowledge is required prior to reading a literary text: often, the necessary information is included in the text itself as part of the writer's world building.

- Students need to grow comfortable in making sense of unseen texts, making connections between details in order to understand literary texts.

- Background knowledge of the historical and social context of texts is often crucial, but does not need to be front-loaded and can be introduced at points when it will illuminate the text itself. Values of the context both of the setting and the writing of the text can and should be inferred from the content and language of the text as pupils engage with the writer's ideas.

- Students rarely come to any literary text with no relevant knowledge – keep an open mind about what students bring to the reading conversation from their own relationships, experiences, other reading, popular culture etc

- Provide prompts for thinking and connections, particularly visual prompts, rather than assuming that pupils need a long introduction full of factual content.

For example:
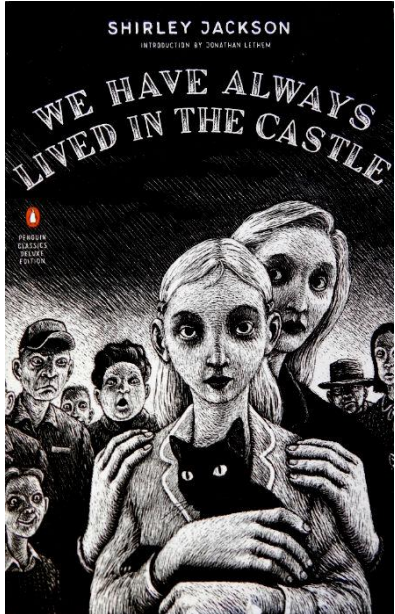
Priming students to think about their prior knowledge of witches, castles, isolation and poisons might be useful as a warm-up for reading this text.

My name is Mary Katherine Blackwood. I am eighteen years old, and I live with my sister Constance. I have often thought that with any luck at all I could have been born a werewolf, because the two middle fingers on both my hands are the same length, but I have had to be content with what I had. I dislike washing myself, and dogs, and noise. I like my sister Constance, and Richard Plantagenet, and Amanita phalloides, the death-cap mushroom. Everyone else in my family is dead.

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HIAS English Team

Please contact Joanna Kenyon Joanna.Kenyon@hants.gov.uk for support with secondary reading, whole school literacy and English.

For further details on the full range of services available please contact us using the following email: htlcdev@hants.gov.uk

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