Reading at the Edge of Your Seat: Motivation and the Prescribed Literacy Curriculum

In 1906, American author O. Henry published a collection of short stories about everyday people, reflecting the idea that everyone is worthy of noticing and writing about. One of these stories, “After Twenty Years,” ends with an unexpected twist. While O. Henry is celebrated for his surprise endings, traditional prose can feel inaccessible to many students.

Using “After Twenty Years” as an anchor text, the webinar will illustrate how the Directed Reading and Thinking Activity (DRTA) can foster motivation around the prescribed literacy curriculum. By encouraging students to predict and reflect on what might happen, then read to see if they were correct, this approach makes the story come alive. The session will also explore ways to use DRTA as a motivational tool across grade levels and contexts.





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Dr. Spencer Salas



Spencer is a Professor of TESOL in the Department of Middle, Secondary, and K-12 Education at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte. An award-winning District of Columbia Public School ESL teacher, he has been a Fulbright Fellow to Romania, Guatemala, and South Africa and a Senior English Language Fellow to Peru.

In 2021, Spencer was honored by the U.S. Department of State for his contributions to U.S. foreign policy through TESOL education. He writes for a variety of audiences, including a monthly blog for TESOL International. He is co-editor of *Vygotsky in 21st century society*, *U.S. Latinos and education policy*, *Education in the New Latino South*, and *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching, First Edition*.

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Welcome Teachers!

It’s Springtime in Charlotte, North Carolina!

Today We Will…

- Take up a classic American story, “After Twenty Years,” to illustrate the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DRTA).
- Illustrate how we’ll use DRTA to read, predict, and repair.
- Think about how we might extend DRTA across grade levels and instructional contexts.



Before Anyone Else (B.A.E) Authors

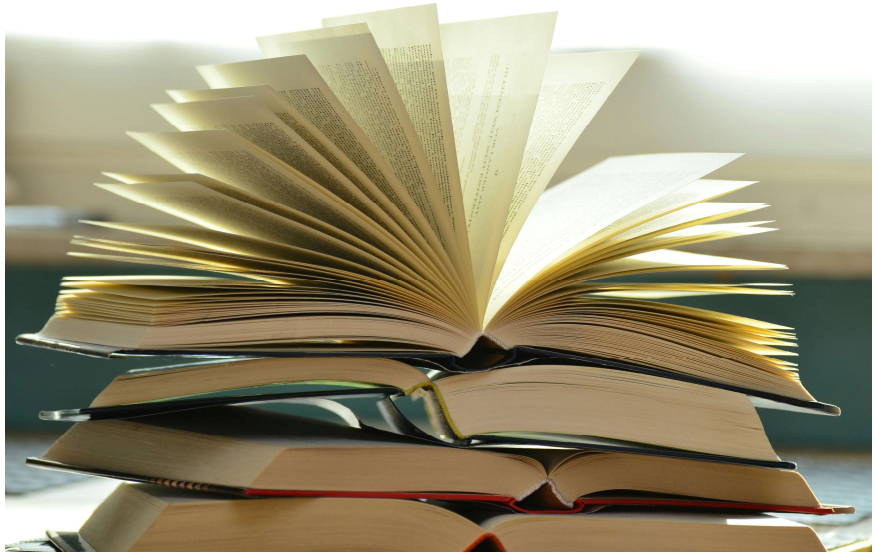
- Great books are national treasures. We celebrate the authors who wrote them.
- There's a popular expression in urban youth culture these days, "Before Anyone Else" or "B.A.E." for short.
- It means someone or something is your favorite.
- "You're my B.A.E."



Now You!

Who's your B.A.E?

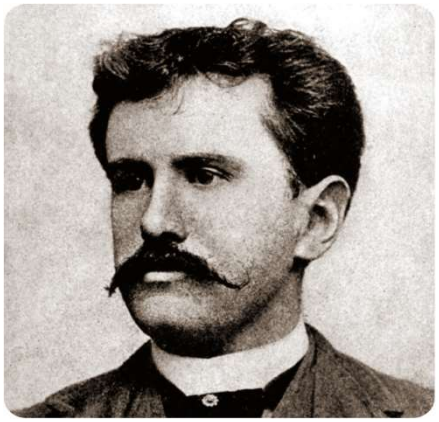
In terms of writers, who's your Before Anyone Else?

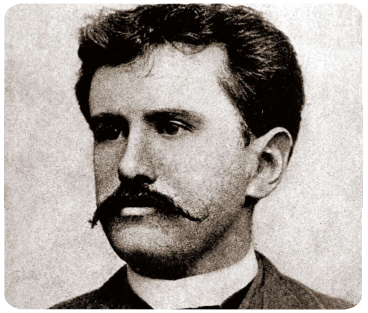


O. Henry 1862-1910

- An American author best known for his short stories—often with surprise endings.

- “The O. Henry Award” is an annual distinction granted to exceptional narratives appearing in U.S. or Canadian periodicals and magazines.



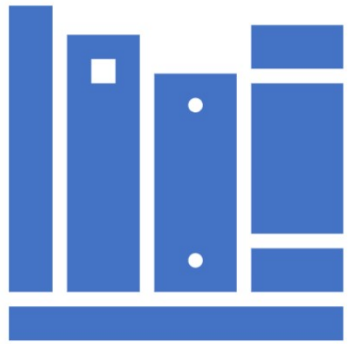


“After Twenty Years”

- In 1892, *The New York Times* came out with a list of “who’s who”--arguing there were only 400 fabulous individuals worth knowing in the entire city.
- In response, O. Henry published a collection of short stories, *The Four Million.* Every single one of Manhattan’s four million residents was worthy of noticing. They all had their own stories.
- “After Twenty Years” comes from the same collection. You can access it on the AE website https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/gift-magi-and-other-stories

“Why should I care?”

- We love great short stories; and, reading them in secondary classrooms is an old tradition. That said, O. Henry’s narratives can be challenging our students.
- “After Twenty Years” was written more than 100 years ago. There’s a century’s distance between the contemporary reader’s reality and the story itself. The vocabulary, grammar, and syntax can be dated or inaccessible.
- It’s a “why should I care?” challenge.



Now You!



On a scale of 1 to 5, how motivated are your students to read classic American literature?

- 1 = Not at all motivated
- 2 = Barely motivated
- 3 = Somewhere in between motivated and not motivated
- 4 = Motivated
- 5 = Super motivated

Reading is complicated!

Fountas and Pinnell (2012) explained:

"Reading is far more than looking at individual words and saying them. Readers are in the fortunate position of encountering language that is created mostly by unknown individuals who may be distant in space and time. The systems of strategic actions take place simultaneously in the brain during the complex process of reading. The proficient reader develops a network like a computer, only thousands of times faster and more complex" (p. 273).



For the "reading-computer" to work, readers need to be motivated to make meaning.

Teaching Reading vs Teaching Literature

- As students move through school, there is less emphasis on teaching them strategies for reading and more emphasis on what they're reading.
- TESOL professionals at the secondary level often have a background in linguistics or literature.
- So, we can learn a lot from our primary school colleagues and what they do in their classrooms with texts.



DRTA and Young Readers

- Even though DRTA has been around for a long time, I had never heard of it until I began working with elementary school teachers.
- But I recognized it!

Remembering Reading in School

- I remember sitting with my 8-year-old classmates in a circle on the floor while our teacher read an illustrated book aloud to the class from her chair.
- She'd begin by sharing the cover of the book and its title and asking us questions about what we thought the reading would be about.
- As she read the story, she would stop from time to time to ask us to explain what we had heard and what we thought would come next?
- When we guessed it right, we were excited. When we got it wrong, we'd look back at the story and fix our predictions. It was like a game!
- I realize now that my teacher was using The Directed Reading-Thinking Activity or "DRTA" for short.

Your Turn!

What strategies do you use to motivate students to read/engage with texts?



Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DRTA)

- The Directed Reading and Thinking Activity or “DRTA” for short is a comprehension strategy credited to Stauffer (1969).

- It is one of many “**guided reading**” strategies that frames reading as an active and thoughtful process, that engages readers’ prior knowledge about other texts and life, and that encourages readers to check (and repair) their understanding of what they’re reading as they are reading.

Getting Started with DRTA

To get started with DRTA:

Step 1: Select a story with a beginning, middle, and an end (as opposed to a non-fiction narrative or expository text).

Step 2: Preview the story and identify multiple points in the plotline where you will stop the reading and prompt students to make predictions.

Step 3: As you read the story with your students, stop to confirm that their predictions were accurate or ask students to repair their previous predictions and make new ones.



DRTA: Predict, Read, and Repair

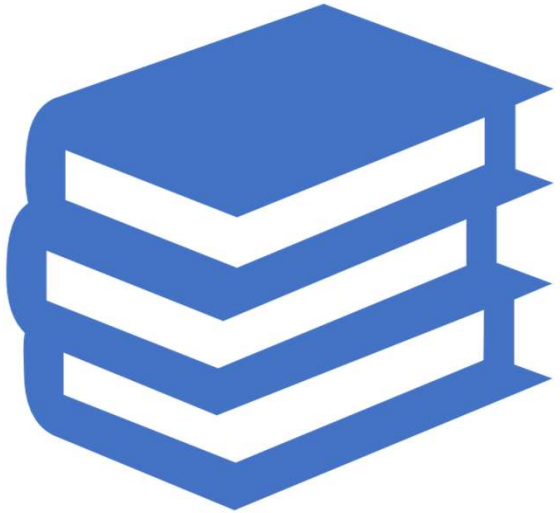
#	Stages	What students do in each stage
1	**Predict**	What's going to happen?
2	**Read**	Was I right?
3	**Repair**	Or, do I need to adjust my prediction?

These three moves are repeated across the entire reading.



DRTA Begins with the Title of the Story

DRTA often begins with the title of the story itself with teachers asking their students what they predict the story will be about.



Your Turn!

After Twenty Years?

Based on its title, what do you think the story is going to be about? Why?



Ask Students to Explain their Predictions

- Resist evaluating students' response as correct or incorrect or good or bad.
- Instead, ask them to explain their predictions with a ***"What makes you think that?"*** or a similar prompting question.
- Here students are already activating their lived experience to make-meaning even before the reading begins and/or their prior knowledge of texts (including song, film, poetry, prose, and so forth).

After the initial predictions about the title, begin reading the story.

After Twenty Years!
Predict, Read, & Repair

- THE COP MOVED ALONG THE STREET, LOOKING strong and important. This was the way he always moved. He was not thinking of how he looked. There were few people on the street to see him. It was only about ten at night, but it was cold. And there was a wind with a little rain in it.
- He stopped at doors as he walked along, trying each door to be sure that it was closed for the night. . .
- Then the cop suddenly slowed his walk. Near the door of a darkened shop a man was standing. As the cop walked toward him, the man spoke quickly.



What's Going to Happen Next? And Why Do You Think So? Read on!

- Stop and ask students to make predictions.
- When the cop notices the man standing in the dark doorway, we tense up as readers—but why? Why is the man standing "near the door of a darkened shop"? It's already 10 pm and that's an odd place to be.
- The waiting man begins speaking quickly. What will he say? What will he do? What will the cop do?
- What makes you think so? What clues does the author provide about the direction of the story?

After Twenty Years!
Predict, Read, & Repair

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- He stopped at doors as he walked along, trying each door to be sure that it was closed for the night. . .
- Then the cop suddenly slowed his walk. Near the door of a darkened shop a man was standing. As the cop walked toward him, the man spoke quickly.



Your Turn!

What's your best guess?

Why is the waiting man waiting?

And for what?

What will he tell the cop/policeman?



Rest of the Story…
Predict, Read & Repair

- “It’s all right, officer,” he said. “I’m waiting for a friend. . . “Twenty years ago tonight,” said the man, “I had dinner here with Jimmy Wells. He was my best friend and the best fellow in the world. He and I grew up together here in New York, like two brothers.
- I was eighteen and Jimmy was twenty. The next morning, I was to start for the West. I was going to find a job and make a great success. You couldn’t have pulled Jimmy out of New York. He thought it was the only place on earth.
- We agreed that night that we would meet here again in twenty years. We thought that in twenty years we would know what kind of men we were, and what future waited for us.”



Looking for Clues

- It turns out that the waiting man is waiting for his friend. He and Jimmy promised to reunite at that same spot and time—twenty years later. Now, the title, “After Twenty Years,” makes sense.
- If a student or students got it right, ask them how they figured it out.
- If the prediction or predictions were off the mark, look back and “repair” the prediction(s):
  - **Were there any clues earlier in the story that might have helped us predict more accurately?**
  - **Were there others that we missed?**
  - **Are there new ones?**

The Story Continues…
Predict, Read, & Repair

- “Have you heard from your friend since you went West?” “Yes, for a time we did write to each other,” said the man. “But after a year or two, we stopped.
- But I know that Jimmy will meet me here if he can. He was as true as any man in the world. He’ll never forget. I came a thousand miles to stand here tonight. But I’ll be glad about that, if my old friend comes too.”
- The waiting man took out a fine watch, covered with small jewels. “Three minutes before ten,” he said. “It was ten that night when we said goodbye here at the restaurant door.”

Noticing the Details and Making Informed Guesses

- What's is the significance of the fine watch covered with small jewels" that the waiting man takes out of his vest to check the time?
- Why is it raining and dark and cold?
- What do the details suggest?
- What will happen next?



Now You!

Will Jimmy Wells show up?



The Story Continues…
Predict, Read, & Repair

- About twenty minutes he waited, and then a tall man in a long coat came hurrying across the street. He went directly to the waiting man.
- “Is that you, Bob?” he asked, doubtfully.
- “Is that you, Jimmy Wells?” cried the man at the door. The new man took the other man’s hands in his.
- The two men started along the street, arm in arm. The man from the West was beginning to tell the story of his life. The other, with his coat up to his ears, listened with interest. At the corner stood a shop bright with electric lights.



The Story Continues…
Predict, Read, & Repair

When they came near, each turned to look at the other's face. The man from the West stopped suddenly and pulled his arm away.


Spoiler Alert!

The Story Continues…
Predict, Read, & Repair

- “You’re not Jimmy Wells,” he said. “Twenty years is a long time, but not long enough to change the shape of a man’s nose.”
- “It sometimes changes a good man into a bad one,” said the tall man. “You’ve been under arrest for ten minutes, Bob. Chicago cops thought you might be coming to New York. They told us to watch for you. Are you coming with me quietly? That’s wise.
- But first here is something I was asked to give you. You may read it here at the window. It’s from a cop named Wells.”

The Story Continues…
Predict, Read, & Repair

The man from the West opened the little piece of paper. His hand began to shake a little as he read.

Your Turn!

What will the note say?



The End of the Story…

"Bob: I was at the place on time. I saw the face of the man wanted by Chicago cops. I didn't want to arrest you myself. So, I went and got another cop and sent him to do the job. JIMMY."

Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DRTA) Recap

- Select a story with a **beginning, middle, and an end** (as opposed to a non-fiction narrative or expository text).
- Preview the story and identify multiple points in the plotline where you will stop the reading and **prompt students to make predictions**.
- As you read the story with your students, stop to confirm that their predictions were accurate or **ask students to repair** their predictions and make new ones.

Predict, Read, Repair

DRTA Across Content & Grade Levels

- DRTA was originally meant to be used for young readers and picture books—and it still is today.
- In this session, I've illustrated how it might also be used with a classic American short story with adolescents.
- Remember, the strategy works best with fictional texts.
- The text could also be a film or a television show (drama or comedy).

Additional Considerations

- Model uncertainty.
- It’s helpful for teachers to model their predictions and then the repairs they might have to make based on how the story unfolds.
- It’s good for students to see that even a teacher can get it wrong sometimes.
- As we predict and read and adjust our predictions, we look back to the text.



Additional Considerations

- With DRTA, we also think about other stories we've read before and look for the similarities and or differences with the one at hand.
- Sometimes, a story we've read before can give us clues about a story we're reading now.
- We start to notice patterns.



Your Turn!

What did you find most motivating about using DRTA with “After Twenty Years”?

How do you think your students will feel reading with DRTA?



Internalizing DRTA and the Excitement of Reading

- From an early age my teachers introduced me to reading using DRTA.
- Predicting, reading, and repairing have all become part of my "reading computer."
- The excitement I felt when I read as a child is the same excitement I feel today as an adult when I'm reading and trying to figure out what will happen next.

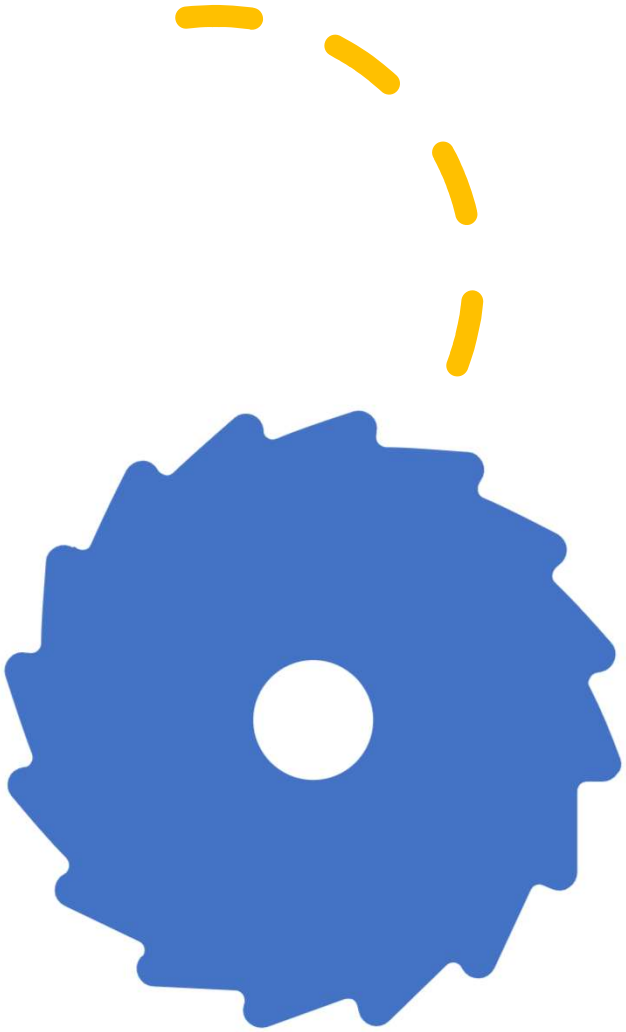
Final Thoughts

O. Henry's real name was William Sydney Porter (1862-1910).

He was born in North Carolina not far from Charlotte and as a young man moved to Texas where he started a family and a career with the First National Bank of Austin. He was charged with the federal crime of embezzlement in 1895.

Porter fled to Honduras, leaving behind his wife and daughter. Six months later, his wife contracted tuberculosis. He returned. His wife died.

Porter went to prison for three years where he began writing the stories for which he is famous under the fictitious name or alias of "O. Henry."



When a Story or a Life Doesn't Turn Out the Way We Thought it Would . . .

- In "After Twenty Years," the waiting man (Bob) explains that his friendship with Jimmy Wells meant the world to him even after twenty years. He kept his promise. He returned.
- Perhaps O. Henry had made a similar promise to his wife when he left for Honduras as a fugitive. But he couldn't predict that she would die so suddenly or that he would go to prison or that he would become a famous writer.
- Keeping a promise to someone we hold dear may or may not change how our lives play out.
- But even after twenty years, we still remember that friendship and the promise of who we once were and the lives we were once able to imagine for ourselves.

Reading at the Edge of Your Seat!

In addition to the O. Henry collection, the American English website provides open access to Jack London's powerful short narratives about the 19th-century gold rush in the Canadian Yukon (see, https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/build-fire-and-other-stories).

Readers will also find Stephen Crane's classic U.S. Civil War novella about a young soldier's emotional turmoil on the battlefield (https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/red-badge-courage-and-other-stories).

Consider exploring these and other AE resources and applying the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity to keep your students reading at the edge of their seats.



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