HANDBOOK FOR LITERACY TUTORS

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HANDBOOK FOR LITERACY TUTORS

A Practical Approach to Effective Informal Instruction in Reading and Writing

By

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With a Foreword by

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This book is dedicated to my mother
Jeannette Avezzano;
her help and support make my work possible;
her wisdom and strength are an inspiration
and a model for what is best in my life.

FOREWORD

Tutors can play an important role in helping children (and adults too) develop reading proficiency. Research has demonstrated many benefits of tutoring across a broad range of tutor populations (e.g. older students engaged in peer tutoring, community volunteer tutors, athletes as tutors, senior citizen tutors, and so on). But some tutoring efforts are more effective than others. In this small book, Arlene Adams offers a framework for tutoring that will be useful and, importantly, increase the likelihood that tutoring will be successful. She highlights three important components that I want to address very briefly.

First, Adams notes the important role that interest plays in learning almost anything. I will suggest that we must necessarily interest children in reading voluntarily–reading, or rereading, on their own when no adult is requiring them to read. My own experiences indicate that if children only read when an adult is watching (or when an adult has compelled them to read through assignments, for instance), they simply do not read enough to ever become truly good readers. But if we want children to read voluntarily, then we must put books on topics interesting to them in their hands every day.

Second, Adams discusses the critical role of success in learning to read. While children must have interesting things to read, they also need materials they can read successfully. All humans begin to actively work to avoid tasks that they are usually unsuccessful with. For instance, while my sons are quite skilled at any number of video games, I am successful at none. Every once in a while I try my hand at one of the games. I lose badly or progress very slowly, if at all. I usually find other things I need to do instead of continuing to try to learn those games. I've even been heard to mutter that such games are "stupid"!

Perhaps it is because playing video games is not very important to my friends and colleagues–when compared to the importance my sons' friends attach to video games–that I cannot seem to get interested enough to work hard at learning to be a better player. That may also explain why I cannot recall ever voluntarily playing a video game. I only attempt it when one of the sons is playing and even then I quit. Doesn't this sound quite a bit like the sort of attitude many children not successful at reading display? Successfull

book and story experiences are critical in developing proficient readers. Too often we have given children struggling with learning to read books and stories that they can only barely stumble through–if that. And then we created mysterious "diseases" to explain their lack of effort, attention, and progress (e.g. attention deficit disorder, learning disability). No one can sustain high levels of effort in the face of repeated failure to be successful. No one.

Third, Adams mentions the importance of tutoring sessions being mostly taken up with actual reading and writing activity–not with workbooks, drills, or recall questions to answer. Children need to read and write lots of stuff successfully in order to "automatize" their reading and writing skills and strategies. It is very difficult for anyone to become truly proficient at anything without enormous quantities of successful practice. Many children experiencing difficulty need successful reading and writing experiences more than they need lessons on specific skills. Adams provides a number of useful instructional strategies that tutors might use but tutors must not lose sight of the big idea–lots of successful reading and writing activity must be the central feature of every tutoring session.

This small book will be useful to almost any tutor. Every tutor is a potentially powerful force for changing a child's future. The keys to powerful tutoring are helping children find lots of interesting books they can read successfully and creating lots of writing opportunities that help children learn the power of their own written words. This book should help developing such tutoring plans.

RICHARD L. ALLINGTON, PH.D.
State University of New York at Albany

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HANDBOOK FOR LITERACY TUTORS

Chapter 1

WELCOME!

As a professional literacy educator, I want to thank you for your interest in **literacy** tutoring. I appreciate this opportunity to collaborate with you toward our joint goal of increasing the literacy abilities of members of our community. I can help you understand what we now know about how literacy works, and how we can help children learn literacy skills. You can use this information, combined with your common sense, your time and energy, and your good heart, to help these children and adults and make a real difference in the world.

You already know how important literacy skills are to people in our society. You are literate, and you are aware of the benefits that you enjoy because of that literacy. You can read to gain information that you need, and you enjoy reading for the entertainment it provides. You can write to preserve your thoughts over time, and to convey those thoughts to others. You can be a responsible citizen through your understanding of our system of government, gained through reading. You can manage your own home and finances, and avoid being cheated. You earn a better living than would be possible if you were not literate.

Literacy enriches your life. It does so sufficiently that you are willing to contribute your personal resources to seeing that others enjoy the same benefits. You will make a real difference in someone's life. Every one of us who live in this society should join in thanking you for your work.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

It is my hope that this guidebook will make your tutoring task as easy and effective as possible. The first chapters will provide a brief overview of what we know about literacy. After that, several chapters describe a structure for the tutoring lessons which will help to ensure that you have covered all the important elements of effective literacy instruction. The remainder of the chapters will give you a bit of background for individual literacy topics, and a number of strategies which will address the topics. Where applicable, the

strategies each include forms on which to record your activities and observations about your students.

This organization has two purposes. The first is to give you a bag of tricks; that is, a set of **strategies** that you can implement immediately and confidently as you begin to work with your students. The second purpose is to provide you with enough information about the elements of literacy learning and effective instruction so that you can make sensible decisions about the best instruction for your particular students.

This book could have been structured so as to tell you exactly what you should do for every tutoring session from the first to the last, and you would know exactly what to do without ever having to make any decisions. However, this would only work if children came in one-size-fits-all. Since they do not, that rigid instruction would probably be inappropriate for more students than it was appropriate for. In addition, that would certainly fail to take advantage of the ideal, individualized, one-to-one situation which tutoring provides.

I expect that you will choose to read this book as thoroughly as you need to in order to proceed confidently with your students. Then I hope that, as you begin to understand your student's needs, you will use the book to help you to more closely meet those needs. I also hope that in addition to using this book, you will begin to develop a support group of educational professionals upon whom you can call when you are confronted with a tutoring situation that you feel is beyond your expertise.

I hope that you will find the strategy forms useful. It is critical to your successful tutoring that you keep good records about your students' activities and progress. You will be making your best efforts to match your instruction to your students' interests and aptitudes. In order to do this, you need to know what those interests and needs are, and the forms can help you record and recall this information accurately. This is especially true if you are tutoring more than one student during the same time period. In this case, your memory will benefit from the information on these forms.

As you gain in confidence and in knowledge of your students, please feel free to adapt the strategies and the forms. In a guidebook such as this, it is necessary for the information to be somewhat general. In contrast, the best tutoring instruction will be specific to the individual students. Only you, in your close observation of your students, will be able to make these general recommendations as specific as they need to be to meet the needs of your students.

THE TUTOR'S ROLE

It is important that you understand the most important difference between the roles of tutors and teachers. The role of teachers is geared to teaching a whole class, and to meet the needs of twenty-five or more children at one time. Teachers are required to follow a prescribed curriculum. They cannot follow the interests or concerns of individual children. They must motivate all the children, and there is no opportunity to use motivational techniques directed toward individuals. If one student does not really master a topic after initial instruction, teachers cannot always provide the extra time and attention to assure that they do so.

Tutors, on the other hand, deal with only one student at a time. They can choose books and materials that suit the interests of specific students. The strategies they use with the students can be tailored to the needs of those particular students. They have no curriculum that they must follow, so they can be very flexible with the content that they choose.

This situation allows tutors enormous freedom. If children want to read the same book 12 times, the tutors can allow them to do so without feeling that they are wasting their time. When children need to talk about a book or an experience they have had, the tutors should know that they are giving the children the literacy interactions they need. One of the most important elements that leads students to love reading and writing is some adult who will engage in these activities with them. When adults show that they value literacy interactions with novice readers and writers, this encourages the novices to become more involved with literacy activities. The literacy interactions that an interested adult has with children can have a profound, lifelong effect on those children.

So don't be afraid to follow the lead of your students in tutoring situations. It might be the very best thing you could possibly do for them.

ETHICS OF THE TUTORING SITUATION

Tutoring in Schools

Most school districts will have their own guidelines for the activities of volunteers in schools. When you work in schools, you should request a copy of such guidelines if they exist. If the district has no such guidelines, you can follow these common-sense rules:

1. Always be on time for scheduled tutoring appointments. If circumstances arise for which you must be late or absent, call to notify the teacher. Teachers will plan their schedule around your expected presence, and if you are not reliable, they may choose to do without your assistance.

2. Tutor only in the locations specified by the teacher. Do not take the students to another part of the school grounds without the permission of the teacher. Do not ever take students off the school grounds for any reason.
3. You should not have any contact with your tutoring students outside of the tutoring situation. Many of us would enjoy visiting with our students in recreational situations, and the children might actually benefit from such contact in most cases. However, in our society in these times, adults risk serious consequences if their efforts are misunderstood or if a child in their care comes to some physical harm.
4. You are responsible for the safety of the students as long as they are with you. Do not permit students to engage in unsafe behavior while in your charge.
5. Conversely, you should not be made responsible for students who display consistently rowdy or unmanageable behavior. You should definitely not be expected to manage students who require physical restraint. You should report such behavior to the teacher if it occurs, and feel free to request to be relieved of responsibility for students who continue to require such management.
6. You should dress and speak appropriately for the school to which you are assigned; pattern yourself after the teachers in the school. You should be neat in your dress, with clothing that is modest and not revealing. You should avoid "adult topic" tee shirts, etc. Your language should be free of obscenity and references to adult themes such as sex, drugs, violence. If the children themselves refer to such topics, steer the conversation into other channels as soon as possible.

Tutoring Children in Nonschool Settings or Adult Students

1. Be on time for all tutoring appointments, and do not skip appointments unnecessarily. Notify the students if you must be late or absent. Model this courtesy, and show that you expect the same from your students.
2. If you are not personally acquainted with your students, plan initially to meet in a public place, during hours when others are around. With adults, you should probably not meet in either your home or their home until you know the students well, and feel comfortable in making these arrangements.

Confidentiality

Never use students' last names in written records. Initials, or first name and last initial are sufficient to distinguish one student from another. No purpose

is served by recording students' full names, and to do so would expose the students to the risk of invasion of their privacy.

Never discuss the students with noneducators, or in public. In fact, never say or write anything about a student that you wouldn't say face to face with the student or the student's parents. Only discuss the students with other educators, and only for legitimate purposes such as seeking advice about specific instructional problems.

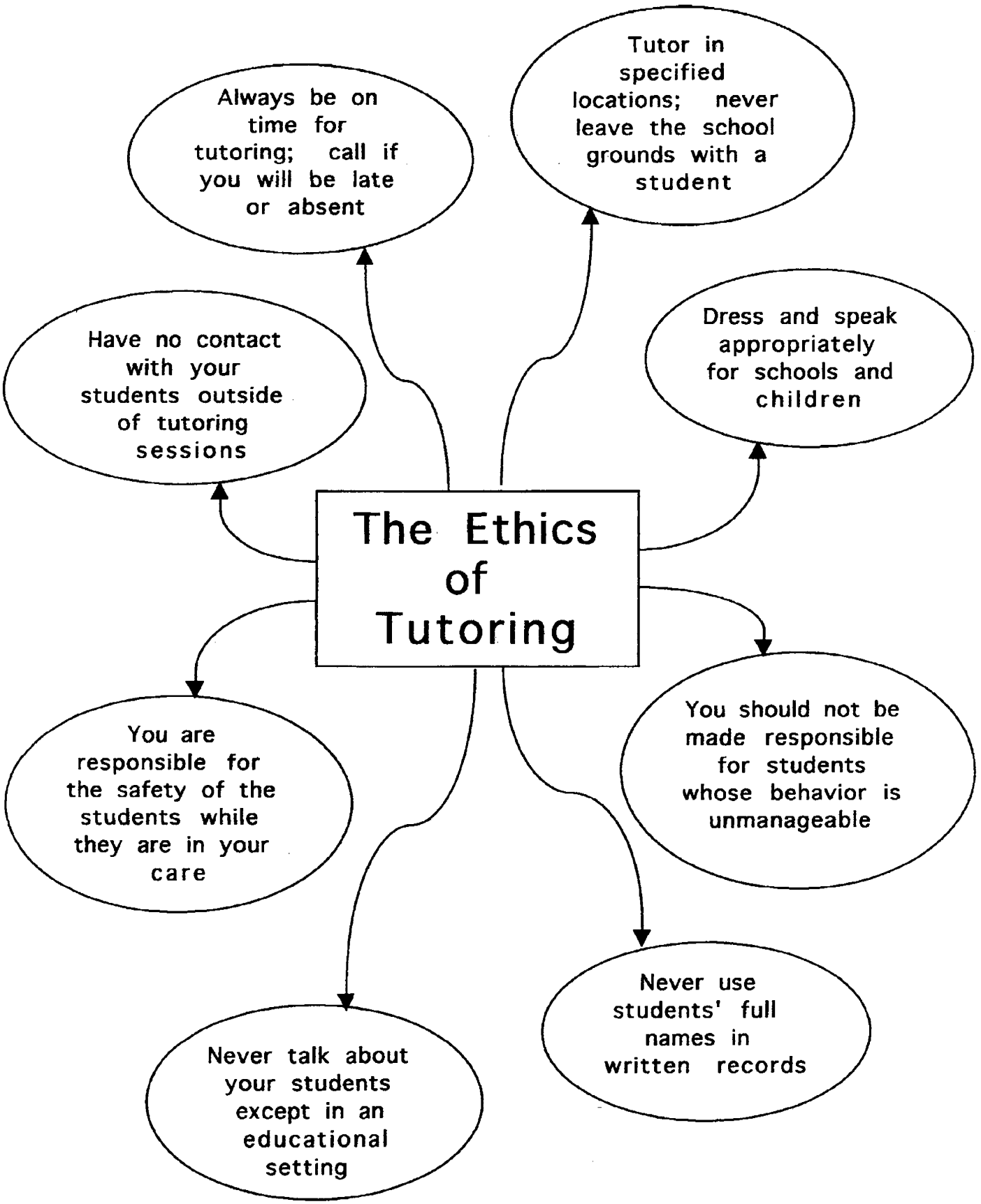
You should at all times treat the students with respect for their cultural, ethnic, and language heritage.

TUTORING VOCABULARY

Included in Appendix A is a list of the vocabulary terms which are used in this book, with which you may not be familiar. The first time each of these terms is used in the body of the text, it will be shown in **bold print**. In most cases, it is not important that you remember the meanings of the terms. It is, however, important that you recall the ideas behind the terms.

A FINAL WORD

I'm sure that you are eager to get started, so take a deep breath and plunge in.


The Ethics of Tutoring
Always be on time for tutoring; call if you will be late or absent
Tutor in specified locations; never leave the school grounds with a student
Have no contact with your students outside of tutoring sessions
Dress and speak appropriately for schools and children
You are responsible for the safety of the students while they are in your care
You should not be made responsible for students whose behavior is unmanageable
Never talk about your students except in an educational setting
Never use students' full names in written records

Chapter 2

READING COMPREHENSION

After reading this chapter:

- You will understand the similarities and differences between traditional and contemporary reading instruction.
- You will know how skilled readers read, and how children learn to read.
- You will learn why **prior knowledge** is important for successful reading.

This chapter may seem to be a bit theoretical, rather than strictly practical. You may be tempted to skip it and get right to the application chapters. However, you are urged to persevere and complete the preparation provided by this chapter. It is critically important that you understand this basic information if you are to be able to implement the strategies effectively.

MODELS OF READING

A **model of reading** is a description of the total act of reading. An acceptable model of reading will take into account all aspects of the act of reading. It will explain, among other things, how children learn to read, how skilled readers differ from novices, and the mechanisms that may fail and lead to failure to learn to read.

Teachers and tutors who believe in a particular model of reading will use elements of that model to guide their instruction. Therefore, it is important that tutors understand the model of reading that they hold, and that they adjust their model to conform to the present state of our knowledge about reading.

Models of reading have been evolving for over a hundred years, and we have not perfected our model. However, we now understand more about reading than we ever have before. In order to appreciate the depth of our current knowledge about reading, it is necessary to explore past models.

The Bottom-Up Model

The Structure of the Model

The model of reading that was most commonly held before the 1960s was the **Bottom-Up Model**. Theorists who believed in the bottom-up model believed that the act of reading was accomplished by a combination of the thoughts represented by the print on the page and the reader's ability to process that written language. This model is also described as **text-driven**, because the important information is contained exclusively in the text. It is also called the **code emphasis** model because the instructional emphasis is on the sound-symbol associations, or the code, of the written language. The readers' goal is to determine the meaning of the text, which is the original meaning intended by the author.

The analogy of building from the bottom up is implied in this model of reading. It was assumed that, cognitively, readers processed information by interpreting the very smallest pieces of information individually. These smallest pieces of information are the sounds of the letters; the process of interpreting is called **decoding**. Readers were then thought to put those small pieces together into larger and larger pieces: first syllables, then words, phrases, and sentences. Finally they arrived at the meaning of the whole text.

Readers who were the most successful were thought to be those who read every single letter of every word from left to right in every line. Once the words were pronounced, the readers' oral language processing abilities were thought to take over, and the readers arrived at meaning just as if the words were being said aloud.

Implications of the Bottom-Up Model

There are several implications of this model of reading. The first is that, in this model, the only meaning that is important is the meaning that the author intended. The readers' task therefore is to discover this single correct meaning. The second implication is that the readers should be able to understand any written material that they would understand if it were spoken. The readers' oral language skills were the vehicle by which they could comprehend the written word. Third, readers must read every letter of every word to be successful.

A fourth implication is instructional: teaching reading was thought to involve only teaching a student to decode. That is, the students are to discover the sound-symbol associations or to pronounce the words. In this model, once readers can decode, the reading teachers' tasks are completed.

The Failures of the Bottom-Up Model

Today, the bottom-up model has been found to be flawed. It failed to explain several important aspects of reading that could be observed. Those of

us who were trained in the traditions of the bottom-up model learned to teach decoding, and were often relatively successful in this effort. However, we found that after our students were successful decoders, they were still unable to perform some of the most important tasks that we expect skilled readers to perform. Although their oral language skills were normal, these skills were not sufficient for understanding written material. We arrived at the conclusion that understanding written text requires more than simply adequate oral language skills.

The model also failed to account for a second aspect of reading. This is the fact that skilled readers seem very rarely to read every single word in a text. Rather they most often seem to select some of the words to read, and make an educated guess about the rest. The only time they read all the words is when the text is particularly difficult.

There is a third aspect of reading for which the model failed to account: this aspect was that of individual differences. We observed that each of the readers who were given a particular text understood that text in a slightly different way depending on their individual past experiences, and that each of these interpretations could be considered equally valid. While in school-type activities there is a teacher who is the ultimate arbiter of the single meaning of a text, in real-world reading tasks there is no such final arbiter, and all readers make their own judgment. Therefore, when we teach students to look for one meaning and then we judge the correctness of their responses, we are not teaching them the skills and strategies that they will need for the real life tasks ahead of them.

It became clear that if we were to teach the skills and strategies that readers needed for their real-world tasks, we needed to teach more than simple decoding (although decoding was still a factor). We also needed to construct a model of reading that took into account these additional factors.

The Top-Down Model

The Structure of the Model

During the 1960s, a new way of looking at the act of reading, called the **Top-Down Model**, began to become important. This new perspective of reading arose from the research conducted in a new discipline: psycholinguistics. This name, **psycholinguistics**, gives a clue to the perspective: linguistics refers to language, and psycho to the mind. Psycholinguistics, therefore, refers to the study of how the mind and language interact in reading.

Theorists who believe in the top down model of reading believe that the act of reading is accomplished through a combination of the information that exists in the reader's head, and the information on the written page. The most important element is each reader's past experiences or **prior knowledge**.

This prior knowledge provides the readers with a framework of meaning from which to build the meaning of the texts that they read. This notion of starting with meaning, the top-level structure, provides the model with its name.

This model is also described as **reader-driven**, because of the importance of the thoughts of individual readers rather than the author's original meaning. It is also designated as the **meaning emphasis** model, because of the importance of meaning rather than decoding as a major goal.

The Three Cue Systems in the Top-Down Model. In this model, text is thought to consist of three cue systems from which readers get meaning:

Semantic cues (highest level)-meaning;
Syntactic cues (middle level)-grammar;
Graphophonic cues (lowest level)-sounds of the letters.

The highest cue system is that of semantic cues: semantic refers to meaning. This system involves the meanings of words, sentences, paragraphs, and larger pieces of text, all as interpreted by individual readers. The second cue system is that of syntactic cues: syntax refers to grammar. In English, one very important grammatical element is word order. The third, and least important, cue system is that of graphophonic cues: graphophonic refers to the sounds of the letters.

As has been stated before, it appears that skilled readers do not read every word in a left-to-right fashion. Psycholinguistic research has shown that skilled readers in fact select the words to which they will attend. They attend mainly to the semantic cues which allow them to construct a plausible meaning for the text; this is called forming a hypothesis. As they continue to sample from the text, they use the succeeding textual material to either confirm or disconfirm the hypotheses they have formed. As long as their hypotheses are confirmed, they continue to sample from the semantic content of the text.

If, however, the readers find that they are disconfirming a number of their hypotheses, they drop down into the next lower cue system and sample from the syntactic system to assist their construction of meaning. If that still fails to permit them to construct confirmed hypotheses, they then begin to read word-by-word for the lowest level graphophonic cues. As soon as this becomes unnecessary for the construction of meaning, they abandon it and once again rely on the highest level semantic cues. The most skilled readers, apparently unconsciously, adjust their use of cues, according to the difficulty of the text material.

The Importance of Prior Knowledge in the Top-Down Model. The key to the mechanics of the top-down model of reading is the element of prior knowledge. Prior knowledge refers to the total of all information possessed by the

reader. Readers use their prior knowledge about a topic to form their hypotheses about the meaning of a text based on that topic. Since every person's prior knowledge is just a little different from that of every other person's, every reader's interpretation of a text will be different from every other reader's.

It has been found that skilled readers are able to engage their prior knowledge before reading. This means that they focus on the topic of the reading and think about what they already know about it before reading. They connect the topic to their personal experiences and previous learning about it. They recall the way the material is presently organized in their memory. This provides them a way to organize the new information they will acquire from reading. If readers think about what they already know about a topic before reading it, they are more likely to understand and remember what they read than if they never thought about what they already know. This process of readers' thinking about what they already know is called **accessing or engaging prior knowledge**.

One reason that engaging prior knowledge assists comprehension is that it provides a **purpose for reading**. When readers can say to themselves, "I already know about this topic," they are likely to read to determine if the text agrees or disagrees with them. If they know a lot about a topic, it is often because they are interested in that topic. If they are interested in a topic, they will probably want to know more about it; this is another purpose for reading.

It is possible that one reason that some people do not learn to read during their schooling is because they have a sense that nothing they will read is relevant to them. They may have had unsuccessful experiences with determining the one correct interpretation that they think a text requires, and have no sense that the interpretation of any text must rely heavily on what they already know. They feel they have no input, and get little information in return. If this were truly the case, no one would ever read.

The contemporary notion of reading comprehension places great value on the existing knowledge that the readers possess and the meaning that they construct for text. In tutoring, it becomes your responsibility to show students this viewpoint and why it works, to require the appropriate types of responses during instruction, and to train the students to use the strategies involved.

There is one important point for tutors to remember in discussing prior knowledge: it is not critical that readers' prior knowledge be accurate or complete before reading. Some teachers have hesitated in the past to help students access their prior knowledge because they felt that the students would simply become confused if their information were inaccurate. However, recent research results have shown this fear to be groundless. Research has found that readers who access prior knowledge have higher comprehension than