

Teaching Syntax to Improve Reading Comprehension

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In this article, we will explain the concept of syntax, its impact on reading comprehension, and implications for classroom instruction and remediation. At times, we may sound very technical, but we ask our readers to stick with us as we unwrap these concepts. We will demonstrate the importance of instruction focused on syntactic and morphosyntactic awareness (see definitions and examples below) that improves reading comprehension and supports writing development. We hope to reinvigorate parts of speech, phrases, clauses, and sentence types in teachers' instruction. We give special attention to the more complex parts of speech, specifically verbs and prepositions. Not only might you learn new aspects of the English language, but you will also come away with many instructional activities for immediate application at every grade level.

Curious Question

In the English language,
how many prefixes mean "negative,"
and what are they?

Syntax

According to Etymonline (2005), syntax is a "systematic arrangement of parts; putting together words in an order or arrangement; a grammatical construction." Syntax refers to how words, phrases, and clauses are organized into sentences (Carnie, 2021). Every language system has a unique syntax that enables people to effectively communicate with one another (Jackendoff, 2022). If a student has limited syntactic knowledge, they may accurately decode words, but will lack the ability to fully comprehend the text (Perfetti and Starfura, 2014).

Components of Syntax

- Word order
- Structures of phrases and clauses
- Grammatical relationships between words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.), phrases, and subject/predicate
- Sentence types: simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex

Understanding word order at the sentence level in spoken or written language is paramount. Expressive and receptive language, reading comprehension, writing, and overall literacy development hinge on understanding phrase and sentence structures. Gillis (2020, 2022) recommends focusing on sentence structure in order to improve students' ability to comprehend complex text.



Gillis (2022) emphasizes that teaching students to analyze sentence structures through identifying phrases, clauses, and grammatical relationships enhances their ability to unpack complex texts and integrate meaning across sentences. This aligns with findings from intervention studies indicating that syntactic awareness instruction improves students' comprehension, written expression, and overall academic language proficiency (Graham & Perin, 2007; Scott & Balthazar, 2010).

As students read, they must understand the meaning of each sentence and the relationship between sentences to fully comprehend a passage. Written sentences encountered by students in articles, short stories, and textbooks are much more syntactically complex than those in oral language. Reading researchers have found “that sentence-level skills determine the progress that children make over time in learning to read” (Deacon, Hoferek, MacKay, 2025, p. 18).

Explicit, cumulative instruction in syntax across the curriculum is essential for developing students' syntactic knowledge. Starting in kindergarten or first grade, teachers demonstrate breaking sentences into phrases and rearranging them to keep the same meaning or create new meaning, thus showing the flexibility of our language system. Using the strategy “I do, We do, You do,” students work with a partner to identify and rearrange phrases in sentences, then complete the sentence tasks on their own. The teacher demonstrates thinking aloud to self-monitor how and when the sentence meaning changes, and listens to students' responses as they complete the tasks to provide timely feedback.

Morphosyntax

The term morphosyntax encompasses the interplay of word structure and sentence structure, often involving bound morphemes (usually suffixes) that contain specific grammatical features, such as **number** (*houses*), **verb tense** (*walked*), **1st/2nd/3rd person** (*they*), or **mood** (see table below) (Van Dyke & Powell-Smith, 2025). For more on suffixes, see [Teaching Reading in Brief, Vol. 3, No. 2](#). While morphemes involve the smallest unit(s) of meaning in a word (*preparedness* = *pre-* + *pare* + *-ed* + *-ness*), morphosyntactic awareness entails recognizing and accurately manipulating word and sentence structures, word arrangement, and grammatical features. For example, students with strong morphosyntactic awareness quickly notice errors in verb tense, subject-verb agreement, and suffixes. In contrast, some students with weaker vocabulary or language skills may not recognize when a written sentence is indicative or subjunctive (see chart below). In this case, the teacher can begin with oral language examples to help students conceptualize the differences in mood.

Mood: A Morphosyntactic Feature of Verbs in Sentences		
Feature	Purpose	Examples
indicative	To state opinions or facts	They <i>attend</i> weekly. World War II <i>ended</i> in 1945.
imperative	To state commands	<i>Be</i> there by 9 o'clock. <i>Listen</i> to me.
subjunctive	To state what is wished or possible and not reality	If I <i>were</i> you, I <i>would</i> ask to retake the exam. As a successful scientist, Albert Einstein likely <i>wished he could had remained</i> in Germany.

When students have a rich mental dictionary (lexical quality), they develop the ability to recognize word characteristics and connect them with related words. **Lexical quality** includes the ability to categorize words into parts of speech, usually based on suffixes. A robust K-12 scope and sequence starts in grades K-2 with pluralization (**-s, -es**), verb tense (**-ed, -ing**), and the comparative (**-er, -est**). These first suffixes are also critical building blocks to use when remediating students with language and reading disorders. Teaching increasingly complex suffixes through middle and high school is integral to morphosyntactic awareness. See the instructional progression of suffixes in the table below. For more information on inflectional and derivational suffixes, see [Teaching Reading in Brief, Vol. 2, No. 4](#).

Speakers of African American English (AAE) may conjugate verbs differently from General American English (GAE), and must “learn a second set of rules for conjugation in GAE. Learning the second dialect involves discovering what is different in GAE, compared with what the child already knows in AAE” (Washington & Seidenberg, 2021, p. 29). Similarly, an English Language Learner will need to be taught English syntax, preferably in relation to the syntax in their own language (such as the adjective coming before the noun, and not after).

Below is a sampling of suffixes, one from each grade level of the forty-two recommended for instruction by [Academia.edu](#) in their Prefix-Suffix-Root List for grades K-9 (grade 9 only includes Greek and Latin roots).

Instructional Grade Level	Suffix	Most Common Part of Speech	Examples
1	-ing	verb	sailing, thinking
2	-er	noun, adjective	server, taller
3	-ful	adjective	successful, vengeful
4	-ion	noun	version, mission, vibration
5	-an, -ian	noun	historian, ocean
6	-al, -ial	adjective	formal, medial
7	-ize	verb	centralize, criticize
8	-ary, -ery	noun, adjective	artillery, cautionary

Effective morphosyntactic instruction develops students' set of variability skills in pronouncing "lookalike" words. Activities include students reading a single, familiar word, such as **compare**, and changing syllable stress and vowel sounds when reading related words like **comparison**, **comparable**, **comparably**, **comparative**, **comparatively**, **incomparable**, and **incomparably**. Introducing and reviewing the meanings of added affixes must be supported in the context of sentences, such as with cloze sentence activities, where students discern which words fill in the blanks from a word bank (see example below).

Morphosyntactic Vocabulary Activity (1 of 6 sections developed for the root cept/ceive)

Define the prefix *per* = _____ and the root *cept/ceive* = _____

Word	perceived	perceptive	perception	imperceptible
Part of speech				

1. The journalist's _____ commentary caught the readers' attention. |
2. A dog whistle is _____ to the human ear.
3. Some students _____ the threat as serious, though others thought it a joke.
4. The public _____ of the war had grown increasingly favorable.

Courtesy of Dorinne Dorfman, 2026

Word Order and Context

The arrangement of the subject, verb, and object plays a key role in how students construct meaning. The following sentences include exactly the same words, but in a different order. The visual construct generated in one's mind will look very different for each sentence.

The cat chased the mouse.

The mouse chased the cat.

Understanding word order and functionality has a profound effect on both comprehension and efficient processing. We rely on word-order knowledge to make predictions and to support comprehension.

What to Consider When Teaching Sentence Structure

- Start with a single noun and a single verb in a kernel sentence.
- Ask the question to establish the subject and predicate: "Who or what (**subject**) does what (**predicate**)?"
- Identify that the verb starts the predicate.

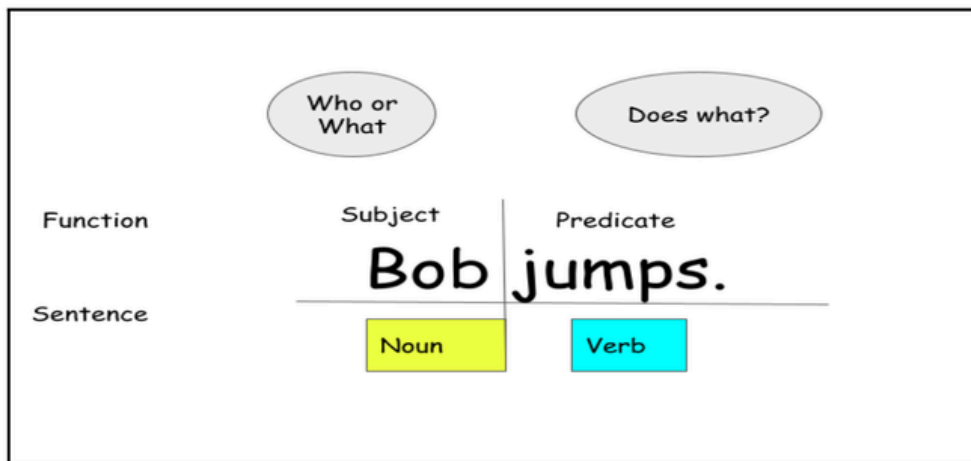
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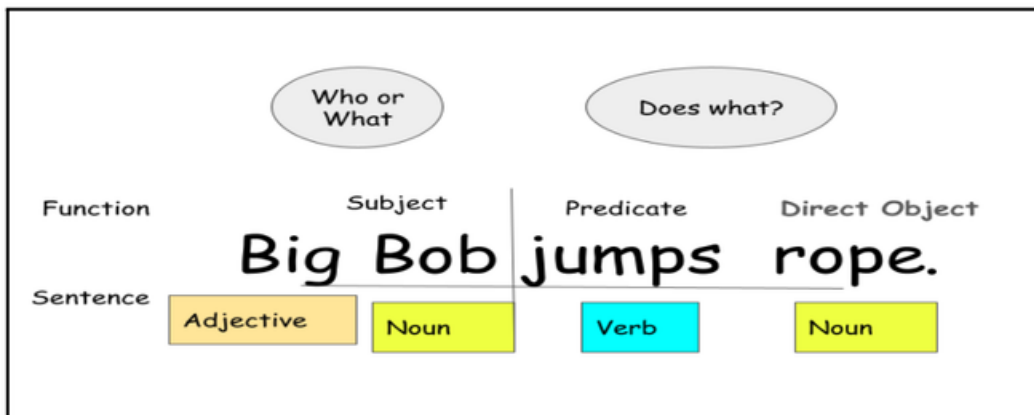
- Identify the parts of speech at the sentence level (**sentence analysis**).
- Identify the subject and predicate and connect these to how each word functions (**function analysis**).
- Expand the kernel sentence, one part of speech at a time (article, adjective, adverb, pronoun, preposition, conjunction, interjection). See table below for definitions and the questions each part of speech will answer.
- Demonstrate playing with word substitution to show how the sentence structure can stay the same, but change the meaning.
- Demonstrate moving words, phrases, and clauses while keeping the subject and predicate constant (**syntactic awareness**).

The following graphics illustrate the process of beginning syntax instruction.

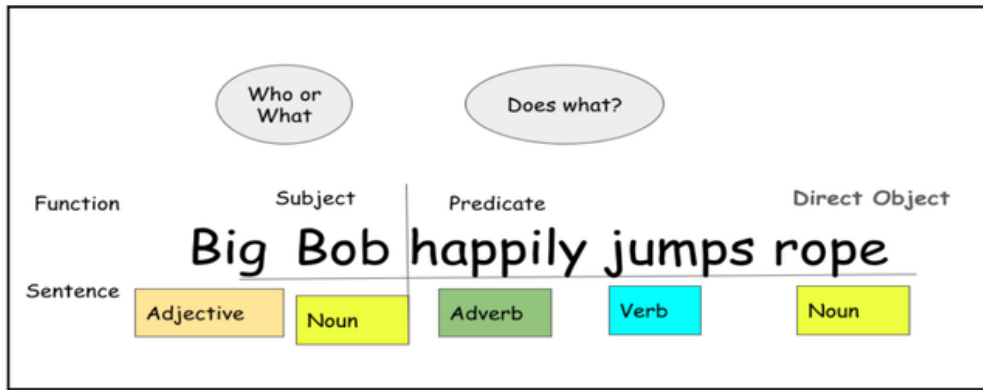
The kernel sentence



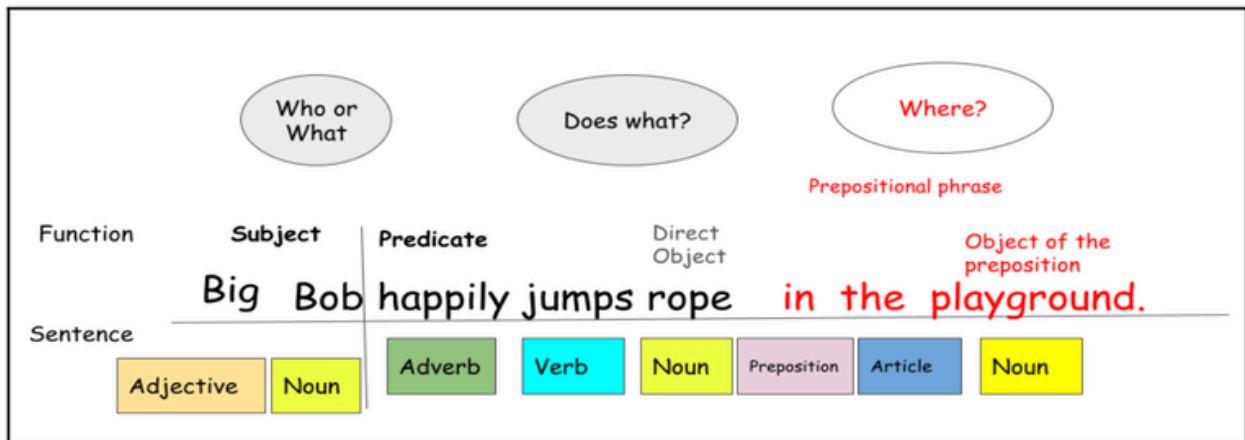
What does Bob jump?



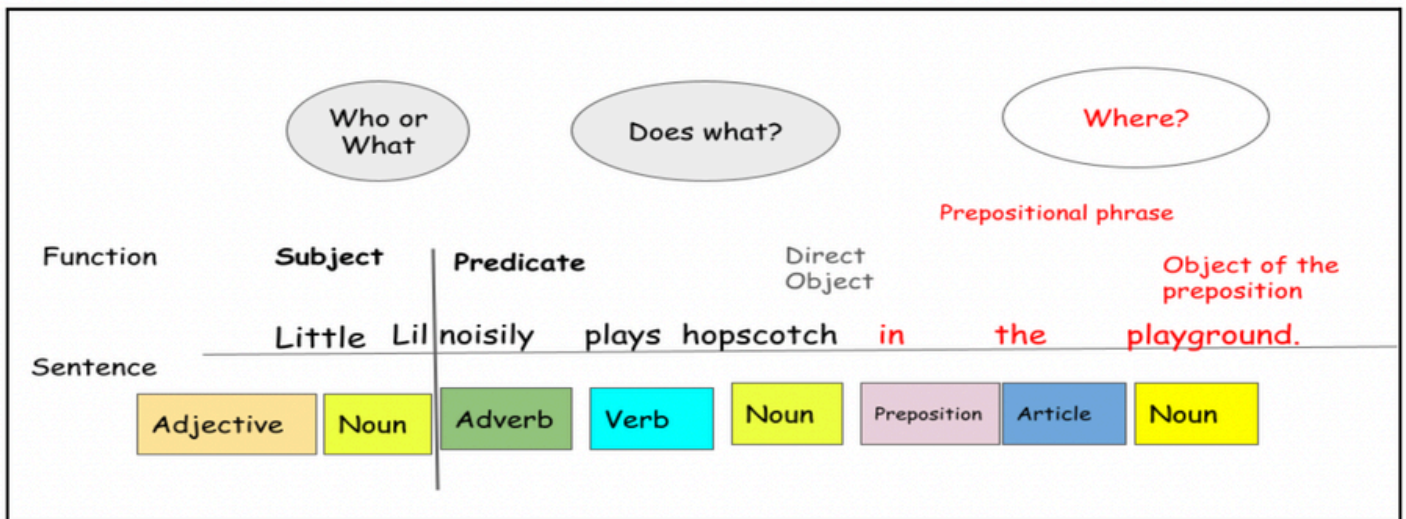
How does Bob jump rope?



The complete predicate *is happily jumps rope in the playground*. The prepositional phrase adds more context – **where**.



Below is an example of the structure of the sentence remaining the same, even with word substitutions.



Images of the expansion of the kernel sentence courtesy of Hallie Cohen (2025)

The prepositional phrase, *in the playground*, can appear in different parts of the sentence, as can other parts of speech without changing the meaning of the sentence.

- *In the playground, little Lil noisily plays hopscotch.*
- *Little Lil plays hopscotch noisily in the playground.*

Understanding Parts of Speech and Clauses

The chart below outlines the basic parts of speech and the questions they answer. Associating each part of speech with the questions is an important goal of reading comprehension.

Part of Speech	Definition	Questions Asked
Noun	Person, place, thing, idea	Who? What?
Verbs <i>See next page for detailed info.</i>	Action and Helping Linking	What's happening ? Did what ? What is or was ?
Adjective	Describes a noun	What kind? Which one? How many?
Adverb	Describes an action or helping verb.	How? Often ends in -ly
Preposition	Shows position. A prepositional phrase begins with a preposition and ends with a noun.	Where? When? How?
Pronoun	Takes the place of a noun	Who or what does the pronoun represent?
Article	Announces that a noun is coming	a, an, the
Conjunction	Joins two or more words, phrases, or sentences	What ideas are being connected by asking the following questions: when, where, how and why.
Interjection	A sudden feeling conveyed, followed by an exclamation point (!)	What feeling is conveyed?

Verbs and prepositions are two challenging syntactic constructs that can have the most impact on comprehension. See the sections below for a longer discussion on each of these parts of speech. A second goal in studying sentence structures is understanding how each part of speech functions in a sentence. As explained in Vol. 1, the word **dance** can function as different parts of speech. **Dance** as a **noun**: *Come to the dance tomorrow night.* **Dance** as a **verb**: *They dance until dawn.* **Dance** as an **adjective**: *The dance competition went on for hours.*

Understanding Relationships Between Words

As students read, they rely on specific syntactic information to determine who or what did what, and identify word relationships while constructing mental images (Jackendoff, 2020; Radford et al., 2023). Hallie has found that a student's understanding of word relationships and usage is a strong predictor of their text comprehension. Indeed, Nation and Snowling (2000) found that children with reading comprehension difficulties often lacked skills to analyze sentence structures accurately.

Verbs

Verbs are the core structure of a sentence, playing a crucial role in reading comprehension. Research shows that students with stronger grammatical and syntactic knowledge, including verb knowledge, demonstrate higher comprehension because they can more efficiently identify predicate structures and determine how information in a sentence is related (Cain & Oakhill, 2007; Nation & Snowling, 2000). Instruction that explicitly targets verb types and their functions has been shown to improve students' comprehension of text by strengthening their ability to analyze a sentence's meaning and integrate information (Gillis, 2022). There are categorically four major types of verbs:

Verb Type	Description and Examples
Action verb	Action verbs show movement. They allow the reader to form concrete representations of an action. <i>Bob jumps. Bob ran. Bob sings.</i> Each of these sentences creates a different mental picture about what Bob is doing.
Linking verb	Linking verbs do not indicate an action; instead, they require the student to conceptualize a state of being: <i>Bob is hungry. Bob feels sad.</i>
Helping verb	Helping verbs add a temporal aspect (e.g., past, present, future) to the sentence that affects a sentence's meaning. <i>Bob will jump. Bob is jumping.</i>
Infinitive	Infinitive verbs include the form of the verb + to . Bob wanted to run home. To run is the infinitive. This type of sentence structure suggests two opposing actions, wanted and run . (Will the student visualize what Bob wanted to do or that Bob was running?)

Studies of struggling readers indicate that difficulty interpreting such verb structures, particularly auxiliary constructions and embedded infinitives, contributes to breakdowns in sentence-level comprehension even when word decoding is adequate (Scott & Balthazar, 2010; Torgesen et al., 2009). Verbs are often categorized into different types based on their properties and usage. These categories vary in how abstract or concrete they might be. There are two main verb classifications:

Verb Type	Definition	Example
Transitive	Concrete verbs that need a direct object	Bob <i>jumps</i> rope. Bob <i>will write</i> a story.
Intransitive	Abstract verbs that do not have a direct object	Bob <i>believes</i> in laughter. Bob <i>felt</i> bad.

Transitive verbs indicate a more direct application to our environment, whereas intransitive verbs tend to be more abstract and void of a tangible application. Hoffman and Bair (2025) found that concrete verbs (e.g., ***run, jump, swim***) and abstract verbs (e.g., linking verbs such as ***feels, looks, appears***) vary both in the information that must be processed and in the demands they place on cognition (Hoffman & Bair, 2025).

Prepositions

The three questions that **prepositions** answer are **where, when, and how**. They contribute to the complexity of a sentence by adding additional context that may indicate **location, direction** (where), **time** (when), or **manner** (how). In the sentence, ***Bob jumps rope in the yard***, the prepositional phrase ***in the yard*** adds additional contextual information. It is not enough to know where Bob jumps rope; we must now ask, **when** does he jump rope? As the sentence becomes more complex, ***Bob jumps rope in the yard after school***, a student would need to hold on to the additional information of **where** and **when**. Prepositional phrases impose additional cognitive demands that may affect comprehension.

Clauses

A clause in a sentence contains a subject and a predicate (verb) and expresses an idea, event, or relationship. There are two different types of clauses:

Clause Types	Features	Examples
Independent (or main) clause	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject + verb • Expresses a complete thought • A complete sentence 	<i>Bob goes outside.</i>
Dependent (or subordinate) clause	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject + verb • Begins with a subordinating conjunction: <i>although, if, when</i>, etc. • Not a sentence 	<i>If Bob goes outside, _____.</i> <i>Bob</i> is a subject, <i>goes</i> is a verb, but this clause doesn't answer what he will do once he goes outside, and thus is not a complete sentence.

At the sentence level, Gillis (2023) highlights the importance of understanding independent and dependent clauses for developing strong reading comprehension. For upper-level students, this includes teaching the functions of clauses that support the comprehension of complex text. Some clauses are adverbial in nature, e.g., ***When his grandmother arrives, Bob will jump rope.*** When his grandmother arrives is an **adverbial clause**, because it states when Bob will jump rope. Other clauses are **adjectival**, e.g., ***Bob, a young boy singing happily, jumps rope.*** A young boy singing happily is an adjectival clause because it describes Bob’s age and attitude. When a teacher asks the questions where, when, how, and why to identify a clause, the student is given the opportunity to construct a more accurate image of the sentence’s meaning.

In summary, when teaching about clauses, the emphasis should once again be on functionality. Teachers help students identify clause boundaries and conjunctions, and expand simple clauses into more complex ones to reflect a broader meaning of the sentence.

Student Handout Example

<p>A clause is <i>almost like</i> a sentence because it has a subject and predicate.</p> <p>It can either be a main (or independent) clause or a subordinate (or dependent) clause.</p> <p>A subordinate clause begins with a subordinating conjunction.</p>	
<p>independent (main) clause: a complete sentence</p>	<p>dependent (subordinate) clause: not a sentence</p>
<p>Mr. Smith will take the train.</p>	<p>If Mr. Smith takes the train, _____.</p>
<p>The team celebrates the deal after work.</p>	<p>When the team celebrates the deal after work, _____.</p>
<p>It was nearly midnight!</p>	<p>Although it was nearly midnight, _____.</p>

Image Courtesy of Dorinne Dorfman (2025)

Conclusion

Syntax is finally getting the attention it deserves for its critical role in reading comprehension. A comprehensive language and literacy program needs all elements – phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, background knowledge, and syntax – for students to comprehend text, the goal of reading. Syntactic instruction includes the “ingredients” of sentences – parts of speech, phrases, clauses, and sentence types – as well as how each word functions in a sentence, and how each sentence relates to the next to expand text meaning. Teaching syntactic terms, such as adjective, subjunctive verb, prepositional phrase, subordinate clause, compound sentence, and others, ensures students have common labels for key concepts that underpin our language, concepts that strengthen the cognitive skills necessary for advancing text comprehension and written expression. Like most language and literacy processes, teaching syntax helps improve both reading and writing skills, and is most effective when taught across the content areas in a vertically and horizontally aligned scope and sequence.

Answer to this issue's Curious Question:

There are **at least twelve negative prefixes** in English. These include the chameleon prefix **im- / in- / il- / ir-** (*impolite, irregular*) as well as **a-** (*apathy*), **an-** (*anarchy*), **anti-** (*antibiotics*), **contra-** (*contradict*), **counter-** (*counteract*), **de-** (*defuse*), **for-** (*forbid*), **ne-** (*nefarious*), **neg-** (*neglect*), **non-** (*nonsense*), and **un-** (*unfair*).

Adapted from Kress, J. E. & Fry, E. B. (2016). *The Reading Teacher's Book of Lists*. Jossey-Bass. P. 146

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Meet the Writers and Editor



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Hallie Cohen's expertise in structured language and literacy is grounded in extensive training and over 30 years of teaching experience. She currently serves as a language therapist and assistant to a speech- language pathologist at the Greenwood School in Putney, VT. Hallie is a Certified Academic Language and Dyslexia Therapist and an Orton-Gillingham practitioner. Hallie's certifications include: Certified Academic Language Therapist through Academic Language Therapist Association and the International Multisensory Structured Language Education Council; Certified Structured Literacy Dyslexia Interventionist through the Center for Effective Reading Institute; Advanced Orton-Gillingham training through Mayerson Academy, Mt. St. Joseph; and Orton-Gillingham trained through the Children's Dyslexia Center. To expand her understanding of structured-language approaches, she trained in Lindamood-

Bell's Visualizing and Verbalizing and Wilson's reading programs. Hallie has training in the alphabet phonics approach through Literacy Through Multisensory Teaching, a cohort established by Judith Birsh at Columbia Teachers College. Last year, Hallie began presenting her work on sentence-level comprehension at national conferences in New York and Georgia. She attended the Ohio State University, State University of New York - Binghamton, and Ithaca College, receiving degrees in music performance and education.



Dorinne Dorfman, Ed.S., Ed.D., A/OGA, has served as a teacher and principal for nearly 30 years in Vermont schools. After completing her undergraduate studies at Goddard College, she earned her Master's and Doctorate in Educational Leadership at the University of Vermont. As a postdoctoral Fulbright Scholar, she taught at the Technical University of Berlin and conducted research on democratic education in Germany. Since completing an Education Specialist Degree in Reading and Literacy Instruction at Bay Path University, Dr. Dorfman teaches evidence-aligned literacy at Barre Town Middle School.

Dr. Brenda Warren has been studying and evaluating reading instruction for the past 20 years through three different lenses: as a pediatrician, school board member, and parent of a now-adult son with dyslexia. Her main interest has been examining how districts can overcome barriers preventing scientific reading research from fully impacting classroom practice, with a goal of ensuring that academic equity is present in our schools. In 2010, her work led her to pursue a doctorate in Education Leadership to study this topic in more depth. She graduated with her PhD in 2018. Her dissertation title is: *Closing the Science-to-Practice Gap for Reading Instruction: A Case Study of Two Schools Transitioning from Balanced Literacy to Scientifically Based Reading Instruction.*

