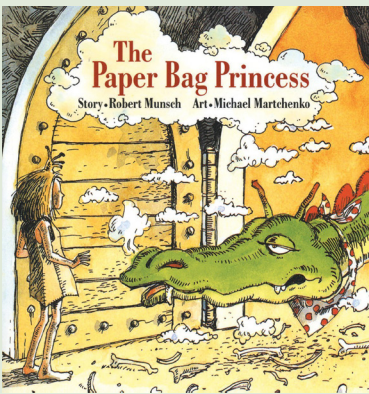


Book Nook

This month's Book Nook topic is...



Developing Story Comprehension with *The Paper Bag Princess*

Having a large vocabulary and understanding complex language helps children learn to read and write. Listening to stories is an important contributor to a child's language skills. There are millions of children's storybooks, and while each one is different, most of them have a similar underlying structure. Just as every house has an inside frame that we can't see, every story is built around an invisible framework.

While the frame of a house includes a number of basic elements, such as the foundation, the floors, the walls, and the roof, stories generally include five key elements: the **characters** (who the story is about), the **setting** (where the story takes place), the **problem**, the **actions** that occur to solve the problem and the **resolution** (how the problem is solved and what happens in the end). To remember what these key parts of the story are, we use the acronym CSPAR.

Your child will have to hear and talk about many stories to develop a sense of the CSPAR framework. Understanding these underlying elements will help your child make sense of the stories she hears and until this happens, your child may not completely understand what you're reading to her.

To help your child learn about CSPAR, you can make a point to highlight the different parts of a story with specific comments and questions during your book reading conversations.

The Book

The Paper Bag Princess by Robert Munsch

Why I chose it:

This classic tale by Robert Munsch tells the story of a clever young princess named Elizabeth who outsmarts a terrible dragon. After the dragon smashes her castle, burns up her clothes and kidnaps her prince, Elizabeth is left with nothing but a paper bag to wear. Determined to save her prince, Elizabeth tricks the dragon into showing off his fire-breathing and flying talents, leaving him completely exhausted. When the dragon falls asleep, Elizabeth is able to enter his cave and save Prince Ronald. But unlike your typical fairy tale, this prince and princess do not live happily ever after. Elizabeth leaves Prince Ronald when he insults her messy appearance and tells her to come back when she looks like a real princess!

This story works well for highlighting CSPAR because it has an entertaining story line, a few central characters, and a clear-cut problem. It's especially captivating for preschoolers who may be familiar with other stories involving princes, princesses and dragons.

The first reading:

Your child will particularly benefit from hearing you point out parts of CSPAR the first time you read *The Paper Bag Princess*, since this will help her understand the basic story.

You can point out different elements of CSPAR to your child before you even open the book:

- When looking at the cover, you could say: "That's Elizabeth and the dragon. They are two of the **characters** in this story. That means this story is about them."
- You could point to the big door and say: "This is the door to the dragon's cave. Elizabeth needs to get inside the cave to save the prince, but the dragon is guarding it. That is going to be a big **problem** in this story."

By talking about these ideas before the story even starts, you are helping your child orient herself to the key elements of the story. Also, when you use the actual CSPAR names (character, problem, action, setting, and resolution), it's helpful to stress and explain them so your child becomes familiar with those terms.

For other ways to "make new words sparkle", check out our Book Nook post on [Giraffes Can't Dance!](#)

As you're reading the book, you can help your child understand the parts of CSPAR by pointing to the illustrations in the book as you comment on them:

- You could point to the setting and say, "This part of the story is taking place outside of the dragon's cave."
- You could talk about what is happening in the illustrations to highlight the sequence of different actions and to help your child connect the events. For example, you could say, "Look, in this picture Elizabeth says, "Magnificent!" so that the dragon breathes fire again, until he has none left."

After you read the book, you can talk about the **resolution**. You could say, "Elizabeth solved the **problem** of getting past the dragon to save Prince Ronald, but all he cared about was that she didn't look like a real princess anymore!" All of these comments are helping your child pay attention and develop an understanding of story structure.

The second reading:

Now that your child has heard the story, you can continue to use CSPAR names, make comments and start to ask questions about what is happening in the story to see if your child is understanding the words you are reading. Be careful not to ask too many questions, as they can make your child feel like she is being tested but asking a few will help solidify your child's understanding of story structure.

Before starting the story, you might ask your child, "Do you remember the big **problem** in this story?" If she doesn't, that's okay. You can remind her by saying, "The **problem** in this story is that the dragon took Prince Ronald and Princess Elizabeth has to get past the dragon to save the prince." During the reading, when your child points to or comments about something happening in the book, use it as an opportunity to highlight an element of CSPAR:

- If your child points to Elizabeth, you could ask, "Do you remember who that is?" And when your child answers, you could say, "That's right, that's Elizabeth – our main **character**."
- If your child shows interest in the big knocker on the dragon's door or the outdoor scenery in the book, you could say, "The **setting** of the story is where the story takes place. In this part of the story, the **setting** is the dragon's cave."
- On the page where the dragon flies around the world, you could say, "Elizabeth is taking **action** by asking the dragon if he can really fly around the world in 10 seconds. She knows that he'll tire himself out when he shows that he can do it."

After the reading, or on the last page, you could ask your child, "What happened at the end of that story? What was the **resolution**?" If your child isn't sure, you can tell her what happened. You might say: "When Elizabeth got past the sleeping dragon to save Prince Ronald, he was very rude to her, and they didn't get married after all." That's the **resolution**; that means that Elizabeth solved her problem by outsmarting the dragon, even though in the end, she learned that the prince wasn't very nice.

The third reading

To fully understand a story, your child needs to go beyond the words on the page to fill in what the writer means but hasn't specifically stated. This means your child has to draw on what she already knows, as well as on her problem-solving and reasoning skills. You can help your child learn to do this by encouraging her to search for meaning beyond the information provided by the illustrations and the words you read to her.

One way to encourage this type of thinking is by using thinking-out-loud comments. These are comments that start with words like:

- "I'm thinking that..."
- "I'm wondering about..."
- "I'm trying to understand..."

Thinking-out-loud comments show your child how you are thinking about the story and trying to figure out things that are not actually stated in the book. They are not questions, so they don't require your child to respond, although she may. You can even point to your head as you make thinking-out-loud comments, to show her that you are actively thinking about the story. Here are some examples of thinking-out-loud comments that you could use while reading *The Paper Bag Princess* to highlight parts of CSPAR:

- "I'm thinking that Elizabeth's **action** of asking the dragon if he could really burn up ten forests with this fiery breath was very sneaky."
- "I'm wondering why our main **character**, Elizabeth, looks so upset in this picture."
- "I'm trying to figure out what Prince Ronald would do if he had the same **problem** with the dragon and had to save Elizabeth?"

These types of comments will help your child understand the story on a deeper level, and, ideally, will help your child bring this understanding to other stories that she hears.

Happy Reading!