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Teaching Question Answer Relationships, Revisited

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# Teaching Question Answer Relationships, revisited

*This update of an earlier article on teaching children where to seek answers to questions when reading modifies and extends the earlier program.*

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## Taffy E. Raphael

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“My students love working with QARs, it really helps them find information in their textbooks, but sometimes they’re confused by the difference between Right There and Think and Search. What should I do?”

“Can an On My Own have some information from the text?”

“I’d like to use QAR as more of a framework for seeking information than your articles suggest; any ideas of how to approach this?”

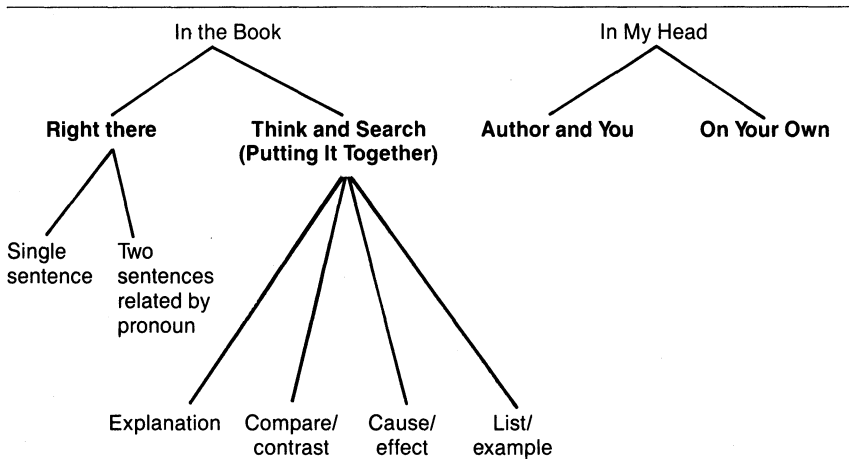
These are only a few of the types of comments I have received from classroom teachers who use Question Answer Relationships (QAR). Because of such questions, and because of the many useful suggestions received from teachers, I have modified and updated the original QAR program (Raphael, 1982; 1984). These modifications

have provided (1) a clearer explanation of different sources of information for answering questions, (2) an easier format for considering developmental differences in teaching and learning QARs, and (3) an expanded use of QARs as both a tool for teachers and a strategy for students.

### QARs: A review

The original QAR program was based on the Pearson and Johnson (1978) question taxonomy. The taxonomy’s creators proposed that questions should not be identified in isolation, but rather in relation to both the text being read and the reader’s background knowledge. Pearson and Johnson’s three categories of Text Explicit, Text Implicit, and Script Implicit were modified for children, using the terms Right There, Think and Search, and On My Own, respectively (see Raphael, 1982, for an extensive de-

**Figure 1**  
**Relationships among four types of question-answer relationships**



scription of the taxonomy and question categories).

Research (Raphael, 1984) suggests that the value of QAR instruction lies in the way it clarifies how students can approach the task of reading texts and answering questions. It helps them to realize the need to consider both information in the text and information from their own background knowledge. Students without QAR instruction often indicated a lack of strategic behavior when reading and answering questions. They often overrelied on either background knowledge, not considering the relevance of the text they had just completed; or vice versa, they overrelied on the text, not considering the wealth of information gained from their many experiences.

Not surprisingly, the research examining QAR instruction has demonstrated that students of different age levels benefit from different amounts and types of instruction. For example, students prior to second grade seem to respond best when introduced initially to a two category distinction of sources of information: the book or story that had just been completed, and the reader's background knowledge. Middle

school students learn the three categories in a single lesson, but would benefit from more extensive use of the category system, such as using it as a framework for considering text structures.

#### **Modification in materials**

The materials were modified to expand from three to four categories, to distinguish more clearly between categories, and to demonstrate the way in which QARs can provide a framework both for students answering comprehension questions in general and as a tool for teachers who must develop different types of questions for the various phases of comprehension instruction. The first modification addresses the number of categories and how they are introduced (see Figure 1).

QAR now begins with two categories rather than three. These two primary sources of information for answering questions are (1) In the Book and (2) In My Head. Most students can easily make this distinction after participating in a brief discussion using a short text with one or two related questions. Here is an illustration of a typical introductory lesson.

Sample text: Mom put a large plate of meat on the table. Then she went back into the kitchen. She came out with more food. She had a plate filled with carrots. She also had a plate filled with potatoes.

Question 1: What food did mom put on the table?

Question 2: What meal were they eating?

Using the above sample text, the teacher initially presents the text on chart paper, an overhead projector, or the board so all children can see it. The text is then read, and the teacher asks the first question. The dialogue below is taken from a teacher presenting this lesson to a group of third grade students.

Ms. H.: What food did mom put on the table?

Student 1: Meat.

Student 2: Potatoes.

Ms. H: How do you know that this food was on the table? Can you prove it in any way?

S3: It says so in the story.

S4: What does it say about the food in the story?

S3: It says there was meat, potatoes, and carrots.

Ms. H: Can you point to where in the story it tells you?

(student points to words carrots, meat, and potatoes)

Ms. H: Great! That information was in the story you just read. That is one place you can go to find answers to questions—in the stories and books that you read.

Note Ms. H's emphasis on locating the information using the text, rather than on the accuracy of the answer. In answering the second question, she also emphasizes the answer information source, in addition to its accuracy.

Ms. H: (in response to students saying the text is about dinner) How do you know? Does the text tell you that it is dinner?

Students: No!

Ms. H: Then how do you know?

S1: You don't eat meat with carrots and potatoes for breakfast!

S2: That's what you eat for dinner.

Ms. H: How do you know that? What helped you decide on that?

S3: Because that's what I eat for dinner sometimes.

Ms. H: You used a good source of information for that answer—your own experiences. Many times it is important when we're reading and answering questions to think about information up here (points to her head), in our heads.

When students have a clear picture of the differences between In the Book and In My Head (this takes minutes for upper grade students, weeks for early primary grade students), each category should be further developed.

The In the Book category is expanded to include two types of situations (1) when the answer to the question is stated explicitly in the text, within a single sentence of text, and (2) when the answer to the question is available from the text but requires the reader to put together information from different parts. The former is called Right There, consistent with the original QAR program. The latter can be called either Think and Search or Putting It Together.

The teachers of Fairfax County, Virginia, have found that some children prefer the term Putting It Together. These children were confused at times by the term "search." They thought it implied a lot of effort looking for answers: Thus, if they did not have trouble finding the answer information, they thought it did not involve enough "search" and therefore must be a Right There. The label "Putting It Together" reduced the confounding of integrating information with difficulty of the task.

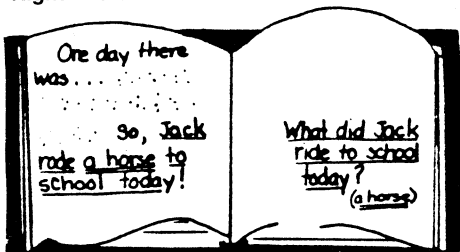
The In My Head category can also be divided into two types, once students have a clear understanding that their background knowledge is a relevant source of information for answering questions. The two categories are (1) Author and You and (2) On My Own. Again, the Fairfax County teachers provided insight into the need

Figure 2  
Illustrations to explain QARs to students

In the Book QARs

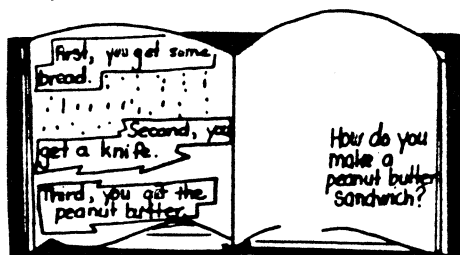
**Right There**

The answer is in the text, usually easy to find. The words used to make up the question and words used to answer the question are **Right There** in the same sentence.



**Think and Search (Putting It Together)**

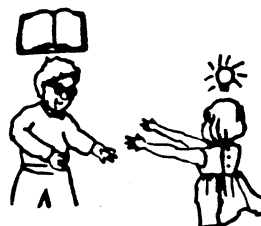
The answer is in the story, but you need to put together different story parts to find it. Words for the question and words for the answer are not found in the same sentence. They come from different parts of the text.



In My Head QARs

**Author and You**

The answer is *not* in the story. You need to think about what you already know, what the author tells you in the text, and how it fits together.



**On My Own**

The answer is not in the story. You can even answer the question without reading the story. You need to use your own experience.



for this distinction.

The key distinction is whether or not the reader needs to read the text for the question to make sense. For example, the question “What do you think David Jacob might have done if he had not had the bucket with him?” would not make any sense unless the readers knew why the bucket had been important in the story. The answer must come from the readers’ own knowledge base, but only in connection with information presented by the author. On the other hand, the question “What do you do when you’re excited, as Jean

was in our story?” can be answered with information from the reader’s knowledge base, even if the reader had not read or understood the story.

Figure 2 presents materials that can be used during instruction as overheads, bulletin boards, or handouts that students can refer to. These include the descriptions of each of the four types of QARs, with pictorial mnemonics for remembering their key differences.

**Modification in instruction**

The needs of students as they move

through the elementary and middle school grades can be more easily addressed by using the four category QAR scheme, whether establishing a general curriculum for teaching QARs or making decisions about presenting QARs in your own classroom.

Begin with the two category system, introducing students to the In the Book and In My Head strategies, as Ms. H did in our example above. When they thoroughly understand the two sources—background knowledge and text—it is appropriate to distinguish between QARs within these two categories.

It appears to be most effective to focus on the two sources separately. That is, when ready to expand, select either In the Book or In My Head and teach the two categories in that source. In the sample lesson above, Ms. H eventually expanded the In the Book category as follows.

Ms. H: When you found the information in the text to tell what kinds of foods mother brought in, did you find all the information in the same sentence? Where did you find the answer information?

S1,2,3: (Simultaneously) In the first sentence,  
At the end,  
In the whole story.

Ms. H: Exactly! You are all partially right. The information is in many places. For a complete answer, you had to think of all the different parts to the answer, search through the text, and put it all together! That's why this kind of QAR is called a Think and Search. Sometimes we can find all the information we need to answer a question right there in the same sentence, but many times we think and search for information that we have to put together to give a complete answer.

Note the continued emphasis on strategies for seeking information, as well as the way Ms. H works the category labels into the instructional explanation. For students to acquire these strategies, it is important for them to see that the goal is not merely to iden-

tify question categories but to use these categories as signals for different strategies for seeking information and using their textbook.

In teaching the distinction between the two In the Book QARs, teachers have often asked about the importance of the idea of finding question words and answer information for a Right There QAR within a single sentence. They have asked how to handle a situation such as the following:

Sample text: Jim and Greg wore shirts of the same color to school today. They were really surprised!

Question: Who was really surprised? (Jim and Greg)

Technically this is a Think and Search QAR because words for the question were in the second sentence, while the answer was in the first. I suggest labeling this initially as a Think and Search, to be consistent with the definition. Students will eventually make comments such as "This is an awfully easy Think and Search. It seems like it should be a Right There, since it's only the pronoun that makes it into two sentences."

When the students raise the issue of pronouns referring to an immediately preceding sentence, you can agree with them and thereafter consider this a Right There QAR. Introducing an "exception" to the one sentence rule earlier can be very confusing for younger students.

In working with upper elementary and middle school students, further extensions of the In the Book category can be made by expanding the Think and Search category. In Figure 1, Think and Search has been expanded to include specific strategies for locating information as conveyed by the structures used in expository writing. Text structure instruction has been recently found to be useful for increasing students' comprehension of text (e.g., McGee and Richgels, 1985; Taylor and Beach, 1984). QARs can

provide the link from children's answering comprehension questions about textbooks to their understanding of how answer information is organized by the textbook authors. This link to QARs helps children understand that knowledge of text structures can help them find information to answer questions.

### **QARs as a framework for comprehension instruction**

QARs can be useful both as a teacher tool for conceptualizing and developing comprehension questions and as a student tool for locating information and making decisions about use of the text and background knowledge.

As a tool for teachers, the QAR categorization creates a way of thinking about the types of questions that are most appropriate for different points in guiding students through a story. Considering QARs within a general comprehension framework is useful.

Teachers should perhaps prompt children to consider relevant background knowledge and make predictions prior to reading a story (Au, 1979; Hansen and Hubbard, 1984). Then, students should be guided with a line of questions that enhance their sense of story content as well as structure (Beck and McKeown, 1981; Pearson, 1982). Finally, postreading discussions should help students to relate information in the text to their own experiences (Au, 1979). This comprehension instruction framework is generally true for expository texts as well (Wong and Au, 1985).

In terms of sensitizing students to the question-answering strategies that are invited during each of these phases, the following can be used as a guide for generating the questions as well as highlighting appropriate answering strategies for students to use.

Questions asked prior to reading are usually On My Own QARs. They are designed to help students think about

what they already know and how it relates to the upcoming story or content text. In creating guided reading questions, it is important to balance text-based and inference questions. For these, Think and Search QARs should dominate, since they require integration of information and should build to the asking of Author and You QARs.

Finally, for extension activities, teachers will want to create primarily On My Own or Author and You QARs, focusing again on students' background information as it pertains to the text. Too many Right There QARs may indicate an overemphasis on literal, detail questions.

As a tool for students, QAR instruction can provide the basis for three comprehension strategies: (1) locating information, (2) determining text structures and how these structures may convey information, and (3) determining when an inference would be required or invited. Understanding QARs initially helps the children understand that information from both texts and their knowledge base and experiences is important to consider when answering questions.

For older students who understand the relationships between different sources of information, QARs can provide the basis for their development of strategies for finding information in text using key words and text structures as keys. For example, a child who understands QARs may first realize a question is asking for information that would require a Think and Search strategy, integrating information across text segments. The child may then determine that the text is a cause and effect structure. He or she may then search for such key words and phrases as *since*, *as a result of*, *because*, and so forth, to locate the appropriate information for answering the question.

Finally, QARs may help the child to recognize whether or not information



is present in the text and, if not, that it is necessary to "read between or beyond the lines," drawing the inferences intended by the author.

QAR continues to be a useful tool for teachers and students. The expansion of categories and modification of instruction enhances the original QAR program. This is not surprising since the suggestions are based on the comments of teachers who have been teaching QAR and using it with students of all ages and abilities. Such feedback is invaluable and greatly appreciated!

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*in this article, and Carol Sue Englert provided the illustrations.*

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### **"Preacquisition" needed for reading comprehension**

A study in France has revealed once again the strong influence of cultural factors on how well children learn to read in their first 2 years at school. The 250 second graders studied lived in two suburbs of greater Rouen. In one suburb, the families were primarily professional and white collar; in the other, the majority of parents were workers.

Analysis of the children's achievement showed a close link between the child's background and success in deciphering and comprehending stories (measured by their ability to recall story components in an appropriate order). The children's success in reading comprehension appeared related to two cultural factors: their general world knowledge and their experience of narrative structures. Both appeared to be better developed among children from the advantaged social groups, and both are needed if the child is to grasp the logical structure of a text in order to make hypotheses about individual aspects of its meaning as well as about the whole.

For details of the study, see Christiane Marcellesi, "Les difficultés d'apprentissage de la lecture sont-elles d'origine socio-culturelle? Un exemple: étude contrastive en milieu urbain," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, no. 54 (1985), pp. 99-115.