

The Five Comprehension Barriers

A Diagnostic Framework for Text-Level Reading Failure

Identifying and Eliminating What Prevents Students from Reading Independently

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Abstract

When students fail to comprehend a reading passage, educational systems are trained to look first at the student—skill deficits, motivation, prior instruction, language background. The passage itself is rarely examined as a source of failure. Independent Comprehension Design™ (ICD™), the passage development framework created by Dr. LaChandra Fitzgerald and We Write Curriculum™, proposes a different starting point: before attributing comprehension failure to the reader, examine whether the passage provided everything the reader needed. This paper presents the five comprehension barrier types identified within the ICD™ framework—teacher-dependent gaps, knowledge barriers, vocabulary barriers, cohesion barriers, and structural barriers—as a diagnostic taxonomy for text-level reading failure. For each barrier, the paper defines the problem, illustrates what it looks like in actual text, explains its cognitive impact on the reader, and describes how the ICD™ framework addresses it. The central argument is that barrier identification is both a passage quality obligation and a measurement equity imperative: passages that contain unresolved comprehension barriers do not test reading comprehension—they test a reader's capacity to compensate for poor design.

1. The Diagnostic Gap in Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension has a well-developed diagnostic vocabulary for student-level failure. Reading specialists identify deficits in phonological awareness, fluency, vocabulary breadth, background knowledge, and inferential reasoning. Assessments produce data that pinpoints where across the landscape of reading skill a student falls short. Professional development programs teach educators to respond to those data points with targeted instruction.

What the field lacks is an equally developed diagnostic vocabulary for text-level failure. When a student does not comprehend a passage, the most common professional response is to ask: What does this student need? What skills are missing? What prior knowledge gap explains this result? These are legitimate questions. But they are not the only questions. An equally important question—one that educational practice rarely asks—is: What did this passage fail to provide?

Independent Comprehension Design™ (ICD™), the passage development framework created by Dr. LaChandra Fitzgerald and We Write Curriculum™, answers that question through a five-category taxonomy of comprehension barriers. A comprehension barrier is a structural feature of a passage that makes a student's understanding dependent on something the text does not supply—a teacher's explanation, background knowledge the reader may or may not have, vocabulary support that was not embedded, logical connections the text left implicit, or organizational signals that were never provided.

Barrier identification does not replace student-level diagnosis. It supplements it. When a passage contains comprehension barriers, student performance on that passage is not a clean measure of reading ability. It is a measure of reading ability plus the student's capacity to compensate for

inadequate text design. Separating those two variables begins with knowing what the barriers are, where they appear, and how to resolve them.

The five comprehension barriers are not a student problem. They are a text design problem. When students fail to comprehend a barrier-laden passage, the appropriate response is to revise the passage—not to remediate the reader.

2. Why Barrier Identification Is a Validity Obligation

In assessment contexts, the stakes of barrier identification are high. Every comprehension barrier that remains in an assessment passage introduces construct-irrelevant variance (Messick, 1989)—measurement contamination that causes score differences to reflect something other than reading comprehension.

A knowledge barrier advantages students who already know the assumed content. A vocabulary barrier advantages students who happen to know the unfamiliar word. A cohesion barrier advantages students with stronger metacognitive strategies who can bridge structural gaps the text left open. A structural barrier advantages students whose extensive reading experience allows them to navigate disorganized text. None of these advantages are reading comprehension advantages. All of them distort what the data can honestly claim to measure.

In curriculum contexts, the stakes are different but equally consequential. Passages that contain teacher-dependent gaps train students to depend on the teacher for comprehension. Over years of exposure to barrier-laden text, students develop a passive relationship with reading: they wait for the text to be explained rather than expecting it to explain itself. Barrier identification in curriculum is an investment in reader independence—the capacity to navigate complex text without mediation.

The five comprehension barriers provide a shared diagnostic language for both contexts: a precise vocabulary for identifying exactly what is missing in a passage and exactly how to restore it.

Barrier 1: Teacher-Dependent Gap

Definition

A teacher-dependent gap is a place in a passage where comprehension depends on explanation, scaffolding, or discussion that the text itself does not provide. The passage was written—consciously or unconsciously—with an instructor present in the writer’s mental model. Without that instructor, the passage fails to communicate what it intends.

Teacher-dependent gaps are the most common comprehension barrier and the hardest for writers to self-identify. Writers who are also educators often compose with an instructional transaction in mind: they imagine the classroom moment, the teacher prompting, the students responding. In that mental model, the text is a starting point for instruction, not a complete communicative act. The gap becomes visible only when the teacher is removed from the equation.

What It Looks Like

TEXT WITH A TEACHER-DEPENDENT GAP

The demonstrations at the lunch counter marked a turning point in the struggle that had been building for years. Activists who had spent months planning finally saw their efforts pay off, though

the consequences would ripple far beyond the city.

A teacher would pre-activate the context before students encounter this sentence: what demonstrations, which lunch counter, what struggle, what had been building. Without that activation, a student who lacks the historical background encounters language that presumes comprehension rather than creating it. The barrier is not the historical reference itself—passages can and should reference significant events. The barrier is the absence of the context the text needs to supply.

BARRIER RESOLVED

In February 1960, Black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, began sitting at a lunch counter at a Woolworth department store and refusing to leave after being denied service because of their race. These sit-ins—peaceful but deliberate acts of protest against racial segregation—marked a turning point in the broader civil rights movement. Activists who had spent months planning finally saw their efforts pay off, though the consequences would ripple far beyond the city.

Cognitive Impact

Teacher-dependent gaps typically occur at the opening of a passage or at major transitions—exactly the moments when a reader is trying to establish or re-establish their mental model of the text. When comprehension fails at those junctures, everything that follows is built on an unstable foundation. The student cannot recover by reading more carefully; the information they need is simply not in the text.

Resolution

The fix is almost always straightforward: embed the missing context directly into the text before it is needed. A framing clause, an explanatory sentence, or an explicit connection between an unfamiliar reference and information the reader has is generally sufficient. The goal is not to simplify the text—it is to make the text self-sufficient.

Barrier 2: Knowledge Barrier

Definition

A knowledge barrier occurs when a passage assumes domain-specific, cultural, or socioeconomic knowledge that is not provided within the text itself. Unlike a teacher-dependent gap, which assumes instructional activation, a knowledge barrier assumes the reader already possesses the relevant knowledge and requires no support of any kind.

Anderson and Pearson (1984) established that readers use existing schema—organized knowledge structures in memory—to interpret and assimilate new textual information. When the schema a passage assumes is absent in the reader, comprehension is disrupted at a foundational level: the reader cannot build a mental model of the text because the scaffolding that would support that model does not exist in their prior knowledge.

Recht and Leslie's (1988) research demonstrated this effect with precision. Students who were classified as poor readers but possessed high prior knowledge of baseball significantly outperformed students classified as strong readers who lacked that knowledge—not because they were stronger readers, but because they arrived with the schema the text required. The implication

for passage development is direct: passages that assume schema measure who already knows the content, not who can read.

The Invisible Default Reader

Knowledge barriers are compounded by what the ICD™ framework calls the Invisible Default Reader: the implicit cultural, socioeconomic, and geographic profile that passage writers unconsciously imagine as their audience. Passages written for the Invisible Default Reader assume familiarity with suburban or urban middle-class life, mainstream cultural institutions, and educational experiences associated with majority demographic contexts.

Students outside that profile encounter a different text than students within it—not because the words are harder, but because the assumed context those words are embedded in is foreign. A passage about navigating a college application process, attending a professional sporting event, or managing a household budget assumes those experiences are universal when they are not. Each assumption is a potential knowledge barrier for a reader whose life experience differs from the implicit baseline.

What It Looks Like

TEXT WITH A KNOWLEDGE BARRIER

Like many families in the region, the Brown's relied on SNAP benefits to supplement their grocery budget each month. When the local supermarket closed, accessing fresh produce became even more difficult.

A student who does not know that SNAP is a federal nutrition assistance program available to low-income households cannot construct an accurate mental model of the family's situation. The knowledge barrier here is not the word "SNAP" (which could be resolved as a vocabulary barrier) but the entire socioeconomic and institutional context the reference assumes. A teacher would provide that context before reading. Without it, the text fails the student who needs it most.

BARRIER RESOLVED

Like many families in the region, the Brown's received monthly government nutrition assistance—a federal program that provides funds specifically for purchasing food to families who cannot afford all of their grocery needs. When the only full-service supermarket in their neighborhood closed, using those benefits to access fresh produce became significantly harder.

Resolution

The ICD™ Cultural Knowledge Audit requires passage writers to identify and test every significant assumption embedded in a text: What is this passage assuming the reader knows? What is this passage assuming the reader has experienced? For every assumption that a reasonable portion of the target reader population might not share, the passage must either provide the context directly or revise the reference to eliminate the assumption. The cultural audit is not a content restriction—it is a design standard.

Barrier 3: Vocabulary Barrier

Definition

A vocabulary barrier occurs when unfamiliar words, phrases, or academic language appear in a passage without sufficient contextual support for an independent reader to understand them. The ICD™ framework draws on Beck, McKeown, and Kucan's (2013) three-tier vocabulary model to guide vocabulary decisions in passage development.

Tier	Word Type	ICD™ Vocabulary Standard
Tier 1	Everyday conversational words (run, happy, large)	Rarely require explicit support. Generally accessible to target readers.
Tier 2	High-frequency academic words (analyze, predominant, consequence)	Most consequential for comprehension and most in need of deliberate support. Always evaluate for contextual scaffolding.
Tier 3	Domain-specific technical terms (photosynthesis, oligarchy, cosine)	Support when essential to comprehension of the passage. Grade-band specifications govern level of support required.

Research with children who have specific reading comprehension difficulties demonstrates that poor comprehenders often show semantic processing deficits despite adequate phonological decoding—they struggle to read and interpret words whose meaning they cannot access, even when decoding mechanics are intact (Nation & Snowling, 1998). The implication for passage development is direct: vocabulary barriers do not affect all readers equally, and resolving them is a design obligation, not a remedial concession.

What It Looks Like

TEXT WITH A VOCABULARY BARRIER

The philanthropist's largesse funded three new community centers in neighborhoods that lacked access to recreational facilities.

If a student does not know “largesse” (generous financial giving), they cannot fully understand what the philanthropist did or why the community centers were built. The word is central to the sentence's meaning, and the sentence provides no contextual scaffolding. The vocabulary barrier is not the Tier 2 word itself—it is the absence of the support that would allow the reader to infer its meaning.

BARRIER RESOLVED

The philanthropist donated millions of dollars from personal wealth to fund three new community centers in neighborhoods that lacked access to recreational facilities—a contribution that community leaders described as among the most generous the city had ever seen.

The Vocabulary Item Protection Protocol

In assessment contexts, vocabulary barriers interact with a specific design constraint. When a word will be tested through a vocabulary-in-context item, it must not be defined or explained within the passage. If it is, the item is answered before it is asked, and the assessment measures text-locating ability rather than vocabulary knowledge.

The ICD™ framework addresses this through the Vocabulary Item Protection Protocol. Words designated as assessment targets are marked as protected before drafting begins. Protected words

receive calibrated contextual support: enough surrounding information for a careful reader to narrow probable meaning through inference, but without a direct definition, appositive, or restatement that confirms meaning outright. This preserves structural accessibility while protecting item integrity.

Barrier 4: Cohesion Barrier

Definition

A cohesion barrier occurs when the logical connections among sentences, ideas, and paragraphs in a passage are fractured, absent, or misleading. Cohesion refers to the linguistic resources that create the experience of a text as a unified whole rather than a collection of unrelated sentences (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). When cohesion fails, readers cannot follow the progression of meaning from one idea to the next.

Kintsch's (1988, 1998) Construction-Integration model explains the cognitive mechanism. To build a complete situation model of a text—a construct elaborated extensively across the reading comprehension literature—readers must simultaneously track five dimensions: temporal sequence (when), spatial layout (where), causal relationships (why), character identity (who), and agent intention (why characters act as they do). Cohesion barriers disrupt one or more of these dimensions, forcing readers to expend working memory on structural reconstruction rather than comprehension (Sweller, 1988). When working memory is consumed by navigation, it is unavailable for the higher-order thinking the passage was designed to elicit.

Three Patterns of Cohesion Failure

Missing causal connectors. A paragraph ends: “The experiment failed repeatedly.” The next paragraph opens: “The discovery changed the field entirely.” There is no explicit bridge. A skilled reader may infer that repeated failure ultimately led to discovery, but the text does not provide that connection. A student whose comprehension depends on what the text supplies—as the ICD™ standard requires—encounters a structural gap.

COHESION BARRIER: Missing Causal Link

The research team spent three years testing the compound without success. Every trial produced the same result: the reaction was unstable and the compound degraded within hours. The discovery transformed the pharmaceutical industry and led to treatments used in hospitals worldwide today.

BARRIER RESOLVED

The research team spent three years testing the compound without success. Every trial produced the same result: the reaction was unstable and the compound degraded within hours. It was during one of these failed trials that a chemist noticed something unexpected: under specific temperature conditions, the compound briefly stabilized before degrading. That accidental observation became the breakthrough. The discovery of how to control the temperature window transformed the pharmaceutical industry and led to treatments used in hospitals worldwide today.

Ambiguous pronoun referents. “Dr. Osei handed the report to her colleague, who had been waiting for it. She was certain it would change the outcome.” Both “she” and “it” are ambiguous. Does “she” refer to Dr. Osei or her colleague? Does “it” refer to the report or the outcome of the waiting? A reader who guesses incorrectly constructs the wrong situation model for everything that follows.

Misleading transition signals. A passage uses “however” to signal contrast when the next sentence continues the same idea. A passage uses “therefore” to signal a logical conclusion that does not follow from what preceded it. Misleading transitions often do more damage than absent ones because they actively send readers in the wrong direction.

Resolution

Cohesion barriers are resolved through explicit signaling. Missing causal connections require explicit causal connectors: “As a direct result of these repeated failures, the team began exploring a different temperature range.” Ambiguous pronoun referents require noun substitution: “Dr. Osei was certain the report would change the outcome.” Misleading transitions require replacement with accurate signals. The goal is textual self-sufficiency—not simplicity.

Barrier 5: Structural Barrier

Definition

A structural barrier arises when the organizational design of a passage makes it difficult for a reader to navigate, even when individual sentences are clear and vocabulary is accessible. Structural barriers live at the paragraph level and the whole-text level—in the architecture of the passage rather than in its individual components.

Meyer’s (1985) research on expository text structure established that readers comprehend and recall text more successfully when its organizational structure is clearly signaled and matches reader expectations. When a text’s organizational pattern is ambiguous, inconsistent, or unmarked, readers spend cognitive resources inferring structure rather than processing content. For readers with strong metacognitive strategies and extensive reading experience, this inference is often achievable. For readers at grade level without those advantages, structural ambiguity is a barrier that vocabulary knowledge and background knowledge alone cannot overcome.

Three Patterns of Structural Failure

Absent comprehension anchors. A passage presents five distinct pieces of information without a topic sentence, organizational signal, or summary that indicates how the five pieces relate to each other or to the passage’s central claim. The information is present. The structure that would allow a reader to organize that information into a coherent mental model is absent.

Mismatched text structure. A passage about a cause-and-effect relationship is organized chronologically, without explicit causal language. Readers process it as a sequence of events rather than a causal chain. The structural mismatch prevents them from constructing the mental model the passage requires and the items attached to it are designed to test.

Structural complexity without purpose. Flashback structures, alternating perspectives, or embedded narratives that are not signaled with explicit organizational markers create navigation challenges that consume working memory without serving a comprehension purpose. The structural complexity becomes the barrier, not the complexity of the ideas.

Resolution

Structural barriers are resolved by embedding comprehension anchors at every level of the text: topic sentences that name the organizational pattern, transition statements that signal shifts in time or argument, summary sentences that consolidate what has been established before the passage moves forward. The ICD™ framework requires comprehension anchors to be planned into the passage structure before drafting begins—not added as an afterthought during revision.

8. Barrier Interaction: When Barriers Compound

Comprehension barriers rarely appear alone. Two, three, or even all five barrier types may be present simultaneously in the same passage—and when they co-occur, their effects are multiplicative rather than additive.

Consider a passage in which a knowledge barrier (the text assumes the reader knows what eminent domain means) co-occurs with a cohesion barrier (the causal link between a government decision and a community's response is implied rather than stated) and a vocabulary barrier (the word “expropriation” appears without contextual support). A reader encountering all three simultaneously faces:

- A lack of foundational context for the core legal concept
- An inability to follow the logical sequence connecting the government action to the community outcome
- A vocabulary obstacle that blocks a key sentence

Each barrier individually might be navigable by a skilled reader. Together, they make the passage comprehensible only to someone with significant prior knowledge of property law—precisely the knowledge the passage was supposed to develop.

The cumulative effect is measured in working memory. Every barrier a reader encounters requires cognitive resources to navigate: the student either compensates (drawing on background knowledge, making inferences, skipping ahead) or fails to construct a coherent mental model. Both outcomes consume working memory that should be available for the intellectual demands the passage was designed to place on the reader (Sweller, 1988). When barriers compound, working memory is exhausted before those demands are reached.

This is why ICD™ treats the five barriers as a taxonomy rather than a list. Passage evaluation must address all five, in every passage, at every stage of development. Resolving one barrier while leaving another does not produce an ICD™-compliant passage. It produces a passage with one fewer barrier—which may still fail the student who needed all of them removed.

9. Applying the Barrier Framework

The five comprehension barriers are not a theoretical construct. They are an operational diagnostic tool. Every passage produced under the We Write Curriculum Passage Development Framework is evaluated against all five barrier types before delivery, using the systematic review process embedded in the ICD™ framework.

That review is anchored by the guiding question developed by Dr. LaChandra Fitzgerald:

“If the teacher disappeared, could the student still build enough understanding from the text itself to demonstrate comprehension?”

Applied at the level of each individual barrier type, the question becomes a diagnostic protocol:

Diagnostic Question	Barrier Being Tested
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Would a student understand this without the teacher having explained it beforehand?	Barrier 1: Teacher-Dependent Gap
Would a student have this background knowledge if the teacher had not provided it?	Barrier 2: Knowledge Barrier
Would a student understand this word from what the passage provides alone?	Barrier 3: Vocabulary Barrier
Would a student follow how these ideas connect without the teacher bridging the gap?	Barrier 4: Cohesion Barrier
Would a student be able to navigate this structure without the teacher clarifying it?	Barrier 5: Structural Barrier

When the answer to any of these questions is no, the barrier must be resolved before the passage advances. This is not a quality preference. In assessment, it is a measurement requirement. In curriculum, it is an instructional commitment.

10. Conclusion

The five comprehension barriers—teacher-dependent gaps, knowledge barriers, vocabulary barriers, cohesion barriers, and structural barriers—are not failures of reading. They are failures of writing. They are structural features of passages that prevent independent comprehension by placing the burden of understanding on the student, the teacher, or the surrounding instructional context rather than on the text itself.

Identifying these barriers by name changes what becomes possible in passage development. Writers can move from general revision instincts (“this section isn’t clear”) to specific diagnostic precision (“this is a cohesion barrier: the causal link between paragraphs four and five is implicit”). Editors can move from stylistic feedback to structural accountability. Assessment developers can move from item-level problem-solving to passage-level root cause analysis.

Independent Comprehension Design™ provides the framework that makes that precision possible. The five barriers are its diagnostic vocabulary. The guiding question—If the teacher disappeared, could the student still build enough understanding from the text itself to demonstrate comprehension?—is its operational standard. And the commitment behind both is straightforward: the student deserves a passage that does its own work.

Passages that contain unresolved barriers do not test reading comprehension. They test a reader’s capacity to compensate for poor design. The barriers framework insists that compensation should not be required.

About the Author

Dr. LaChandra Fitzgerald is the Founder and CEO of We Write Curriculum™, a reading comprehension research-informed curriculum development organization serving grades 3–12. She developed the We Write Curriculum Passage Development Framework and created Independent Comprehension Design™—including the five comprehension barrier taxonomy—as its operational standard. This paper is the second in a series exploring the ICD™ framework and its applications in

assessment and curriculum. White Paper 01, “Designing for the Solo Reader: Why Text Quality Must Be Evaluated by What a Student Can Do Alone,” is available at wewritecurriculum.com.

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