

Reading at the Edge of Your Seat: Anticipation and the Classic American Short Story

Spencer Salas, USA, Blanca Terrazas, Peru

“Twenty years ago tonight,” said the man, “I had dinner here with Jimmy Wells. He was my best friend and the best fellow in the world. He and I grew up together here in New York, like two brothers. I was eighteen and Jimmy was twenty. The next morning, I was to start for the West. I was going to find a job and make a great success. You couldn’t have pulled Jimmy out of New York. He thought it was the only place on earth.... We agreed that night that we would meet here again in twenty years. We thought that in twenty years we would know what kind of men we were, and what future waited for us.” (O. Henry, “After Twenty Years”)

The short story is a textual category that has been characterized as a uniquely American literary form. First emerging in the early 19th century, the genre has since been defined and refined by U.S. authors past and present including some of the nation’s finest. Among these, William Sydney Porter (otherwise known as “O. Henry”) was so celebrated that an annual prize was conceived to honor him and the short-story genre that he helped define. One such example, “After Twenty Years,” opens at 10 o’clock in the evening with the image of a police officer making his way down a wet wintry street. The policeman or “cop” as they were called in turn-of-the-century New York City, crosses a stranger (quoted above) who explains that twenty years earlier, he and his best friend had said their goodbyes at the same door. One was about to leave for the West and to try out his luck in that fabled land of golden opportunities. The other, Jimmy Wells, stayed behind. They left each other swearing that in twenty years they would find each

other at the same time and same place to share what had become of each of them.

We love short stories, but the truth is that any sort of “classic” American narrative can be challenging for English language teaching professionals and the young people in their virtual and brick and mortar classrooms. For one thing, “After Twenty Years” was written more than 100 years ago. There’s a vast temporal distance between the contemporary reader’s reality and the author’s—not to mention vocabulary or syntax that might appear dated or inaccessible. But even more, for many of our adolescent students, it’s a “why should I care?” challenge. The work of the teacher is to motivate them to want to read vintage American fiction and to keep reading.

In this article, we take up “After Twenty Years” as an anchor text to illustrate how teachers might use Directed Reading and Thinking Activity (“DRTA” for short)—a well-known literacy comprehension strategy for teachers of young children but less so in

secondary and postsecondary contexts. By having readers make predictions about a fiction narrative and then read to confirm or refute those predictions, we illustrate how English language and literacy professionals might turn to DRTA to motivate thinking and reading across the prescribed secondary-level literacy curriculum. We conclude with ideas about how DRTA gives readers of all ages permission to assert their own imaginations as they read narrative fiction.

READING O. HENRY WITH DRTA

Reading is complicated. Or, as Fountas and Pinnell (2012) explain, “The proficient reader develops a network like a computer, only thousands of times faster and more complex” (273). For the “reading-computer” to work, readers need to be motivated to make meaning, and in terms of teaching, there are a range of strategies that we can choose from to create and sustain that motivation. In a series of recent collaborations surrounding motivation and the prescribed literacy curriculum, we’ve explored how teachers might tap into visualization strategies to help students “see” a Jack London narrative of a gold prospector injured and lost in the Canadian Yukon (Salas et al. 2019). We’ve also theorized how teachers might apply the Question-Answer Relationship (QAR) approach with a Stephen Crane story “The Open Boat” to engage students in the sort of critical questioning that active reading requires (Salas et al. 2024). Likewise, we’ve leveraged process-oriented applied theatre games and freewriting as frames for enhancing reading comprehension with American poetry (Murray and Salas 2017; Salas et al. 2016), the 19th century novel (Murray and Salas 2014b) contemporary young adult fiction (Murray and Salas

2014a), and the prescribed curriculum, more broadly (Musetti et al. 2016; Salas and Garson 2007).

The DRTA strategy is also a comprehension strategy. It’s credited to Stauffer (1969) and has shaped the way many U.S. school children first learn to engage in narratives. Simply put, DRTA asks teachers to guide students through a reading selection by asking questions about what they think the text will be about or what will happen next and then reading onwards to see if what they predicted would happen, happens (Richek, 1987). Associated with increased comprehension, critical thinking skills, and reader-motivation, DRTA is one of many “guided reading” strategies that frames reading as an active and thoughtful process, engages readers’ prior knowledge about other texts and life, and encourages readers to check (and repair) their understanding of what they’re reading as they are reading.

In our own childhood classrooms, we remember sitting with our eight-year-old classmates in a circle on the floor while our teacher read an illustrated book aloud to the class from her chair. She’d begin by sharing the cover of the book and its title and ask us questions about what we thought the reading would be about. Then, as she read the story aloud to us, our teacher would pause and ask the class to explain what we had heard and what we thought would come next. Then she’d read on to see if our predictions were on target or if they needed readjusting. We’d keep guessing the direction of the narrative. When we got it right, we were excited. When we were wrong, we’d recalibrate and make new predictions. It was like a game!

DRTA has stuck with us as readers. It’s something we still do with any sort of text

including, for example, movies. From the opening scene of, let's say, one of Tom Cruise's *Mission: Impossible* installments, we begin guessing what's going to happen to the protagonist, Ethan Hunt, how the plot will unfold, who will live, who will die, who will fall in love and out of love. In other words, we enter the process of co-authoring the narrative. Sometimes we are so excited that we even blurt out what we think is going to happen. We especially like stories that keep us guessing, that surprise us, that don't happen the way we predicted they would. Here's how to get started:

1. Selecting a Text: Where can we stop and start the narrative?

Select a short fiction narrative. Ideally, the story has some sort of beginning, middle, and ending (as opposed to a non-fiction narrative or expository text). For this article and thinking about a global audience of secondary and postsecondary level multilingual learners, we'll use "After Twenty Years" as an anchor. It's short, available for free on the American English website, and it's similar in length and difficulty to the prescribed readings that U.S. students might encounter in a 10th grade English classroom setting. We note that the American English website also includes, in addition to the O. Henry collection, a sampling of stories by Mark Twain, Jack London, Stephen Crane, and Edgar Allen Poe. We encourage our colleagues to explore them.

Once the teacher (or class) has selected a narrative—be it "Twenty Years After" or another—the first step is for the teacher to preview the story and identify multiple points in the plotline where the teacher will stop the reading and prompt students to make predictions and/or confirm or repair

their previous predictions. Regardless of the story, DRTA includes a constant movement of predicting, reading, and repairing reading if necessary. In the sections that follows, we'll illustrate these recurring moves with excerpts from "After Twenty Years."

2. Predicting: What's going to happen?

DRTA begins with the title of the story itself with teachers asking their students what they predict the story will be about. In a classroom it might sound something like this:

Teacher: Today we're going to read a short story by Sydney Porter, otherwise known as "O. Henry." It's called, "After Twenty Years." Based on the title, what do you think the story is going to be about?

Student(s): A birthday?

Teacher: Why do you say that?

Student(s): Because twenty years is a big birthday? Or maybe it's about a wedding anniversary—twenty years of marriage? My parents celebrated their 20th anniversary last year.

Student(s): It makes me think of Taylor Swift. She has a song called "Fifteen."

Teacher: What's the song about?

Student(s): It's about how Taylor remembered falling in love when she was fifteen.

Teacher: Let's keep reading to see how your predictions work out.

Resist evaluating students' responses. Instead, prompt them to elaborate on their predictions with a "What makes you think

that?” or a similar prompt. Here students are already activating their lived experience and/or their prior knowledge of texts (including song, film, poetry, prose, and so forth) to make meaning even before reading begins. Ask them to explain where their predictions come from. What makes them think or maybe just feel that something will or will not happen next? What are the clues? Where are they located?

As we have explained, the O. Henry narrative opens with the scene of a “strong and important” police officer or “cop” walking down a wet city street. He notices a man standing in a dark doorway:

There were few people on the street to see him. It was only about ten at night. . . .

Then the cop suddenly slowed his walk. Near the door of a darkened shop a man was standing. As the cop walked toward him, the man spoke quickly.

Teachers will most likely want to take a moment here to clarify that “cop” is slang for “police officer.” Afterwards, ask students to predict what will happen next. For example, when the cop notices the man standing in the dark doorway, we sense something is going to happen. We tense up as readers—but why? Why is the man standing “near the door of a darkened shop”? It’s already 10 p.m., and that’s an odd place to be. The cop approaches him, and the waiting man begins speaking quickly. What will he say? What will he do? What will the cop do?

Again, have students voice their predictions out loud or write them silently on paper and share them with the whole class or their peers or partners. In a classroom setting, it might sound something like this:

Teacher: So, what do you think the man is doing near the door of the darkened shop at 10:00 p.m. on a cold and rainy night? What do you think he’s going to say to the policeman?

Student(s): Well, it’s hard to say, but my guess is that the man is in trouble. Maybe he’s lost.

Teacher: Could be! What makes you think that?

Student(s): One thing for sure is nothing good ever happens in a story on a dark street so late at night. I am thinking he’s in some sort of trouble and that the policeman is going to help him.

Teacher: Let’s read ahead and find out if you got it right!

At this juncture of the narrative, the significance of the title “After Twenty Years” remains ambiguous. O. Henry keeps us hanging. What will “After Twenty Years” be about? It’s still anybody’s guess.

3. Reading and Repairing: Was I right? Or do I need to adjust my prediction?

A paragraph or two into the story, we learn why the waiting man is waiting (and the title’s significance). He and Jimmy promised each other a reunion at that same spot and time—twenty years later.

“I know that Jimmy will meet me here if he can. He was as true as any man in the world. He’ll never forget. I came a thousand miles to stand here tonight. But I’ll be glad about that, if my old friend comes too.” The waiting man took out a fine watch, covered with small jewels. “Three minutes before ten,” he said. “It was ten that night when we said goodbye here at the restaurant door. . . . If Jimmy is alive on earth, he’ll be here.”. . .

And at the door of the shop stood the man who had come a thousand miles to meet a friend. Such a meeting could not be certain. But he waited.

At this juncture of the story, some of us might be surprised as the story turns out to be about something we didn't expect. We look back at the entire text and (re)consider our predictions considering the textual evidence at hand.

4. Extending DRTA: What can we learn from our predictions to inform new readings?

As students become more comfortable making predictions (and repairing them), teachers might begin asking additional questions about where their predictions come from. If a student or a group of students got it right, we might ask them how they figured it out ahead of time. What informed their predictions? Or, in the case that the prediction or predictions were off the mark, we might ask ourselves and our students, "What clues informed our predictions? Were there others that we missed? Are there new ones?"

Teacher: So, tell me, were you right about the title?

Student(s): Sort of, but not really. Now I understand the story is going to be about a reunion between two old friends! So that changes what I think is going to happen next!

Teacher: What's your new prediction?

Student(s): I hope he's going to find his friend Jimmy Wells! But there is something that makes me think something bad is going to happen. I'm feeling sort of nervous.

Teacher: Why do you think something bad might happen?

Student(s): Because it's dark.

Questions might be even more specific to the text: "What's the significance of the 'fine watch covered with small jewels' that the waiting man takes out of his vest to check the time? Why is it raining and dark and cold? Does the bad weather possibly suggest an unhappy ending?"

As we assess and possibly adjust our predictions, we look back to the text. We also think about other stories we've read before and look for the similarities and or differences with the one at hand. Maybe the waiting man is not a bad guy after all? Maybe he's just a very devoted friend? Or maybe he could be both things at the same time? There's still something ominous about the darkness of the rainy street and the presence of the law enforcement officer.

Sometimes, a story we've read before can give us clues about a story we're reading now. We notice patterns across narratives (e.g., Bad Weather/Unhappy Ending; Good Weather/Happy Ending). We must read on to find out! And that suspense, we argue, engages us as readers. We want to know what happens next!

CONCLUSION: REIMAGINING READING AT THE EDGE OF OUR SEATS

At the heart of the "science of reading" is how to make students care about what they read and want to read more. Barber and Klauda (2020) explain it this way: "When students set reading goals, value reading, and believe in themselves as readers, they more willingly and fully engage in reading activities" (28). It's that admonition that

drew us to juxtapose O. Henry’s “After Twenty Years” with a DRTA approach. By having readers ask questions about the reading, make predictions about the narrative, and then read to confirm or refute those predictions, we described how teachers might lean into predication-making to motivate thinking and reading.

DRTA was and still is very much a strategy for young readers. However, here we’ve illustrated how it might also be used with a classic American short story with young adult readers. Remember, the strategy works best with fictional texts (broadly conceived to include film, television, and even music). Again, as we take up DRTA in our classrooms, it’s helpful for teachers to model their predictions and then the repairs they might have to make based on how the story unfolds. We predict. We read. We adjust our predictions. We read more. In the meantime, we look back to the text and forward to what the ending might be. That’s how DRTA puts the “reading computer” in gear. It creates a sensation of anticipation.

One of the advantages of DRTA is its ability to accommodate both small and large numbers of students. During a reading, the teacher can arrange readers in pairs or small groups to come up with a shared prediction. A representative from each group might then share their predication with the rest of the class (on a chalkboard, or whiteboard, or screen, or even just orally) and the evidence or clues from the text that led them to their prediction. As the reading continues, the flow of prediction and repairing continues—but at a group level—with the teacher stopping to ask again for (repaired) predictions and the evidence to support them.

As we explained at the start of this article, the vocabulary and syntax of a classic American short story can create challenges for adolescent readers. We encourage teachers to preview a story and identify key words to teach in advance of the reading (see, e.g., Salas et al. 2019). In the case of “After Twenty Years,” that list of vocabulary will most likely include, for example, “cop” as U.S. slang for “police officer.” That said, DRTA isn’t about teaching and learning new words. It’s about creating the motivation for readers to want to learn them so that they might better understand the story and, therefore, make better predictions.

Before, during, and after reading, teachers might likewise provide a glimpse of the cultural and historical context to enrich the readers’ global understanding of the story and to support their prediction-making. For example, in the U.S. mythos, the American West has historically been framed as a “frontier of opportunity” where individuals might reinvent themselves and their lives through their own determination or “grit” and a bit of good luck. “Go west, young man, and grow up with the country” was a celebrated 19th-century refrain commonly attributed to the *New York Tribune*’s founding editor, Horace Greeley. It still rings true for many Americans.

As teachers try out DRTA, it’s helpful to model the sorts of repairs even teachers might have to make to their predictions and to make new ones based on the clues the author provides. This is both a way to demonstrate the DRTA strategy and to help students understand that even well-read adults can get it wrong sometimes. DRTA gives us permission to guess ahead—and it feels good when we get it right. When a story ends with an unexpected twist like the

kind that made O. Henry famous, we delight in the author's innovation.

Finally, from our own experiences as readers and teachers, we'll add that with practice, the overlapping movements of the approach (reading, predicting, and repairing) quickly become part of the way we approach any sort of fictional narrative whether it be a classic American short story or a popular television series or even the lyrics to a contemporary song—anticipating what will come next and then recalibrating that expectation based on what happens. With DRTA, we learn to read (or watch or listen) at the edge of our seats, and reading becomes exciting.

The O. Henry story reaches its end. The policeman says goodbye to the waiting man and continues his patrol in the darkness. Minutes later, the shadow of another man appears from around the corner and runs to the waiting man:

"Is that you, Bob?" he asked, doubtfully.

"Is that you, Jimmy Wells?" cried the man at the door.

We'll resist sharing what happens next. However, *Forum* readers can access the ending on the American English website along with a selection of some of O. Henry's very best, very short, and very thought-provoking narratives of the human condition and the unexpected twists and turns that make it so.

REFERENCES

Barber, Ana Taboada, and Susan Lutz Klauda. 2020. "How Reading Motivation and Engagement Enable Reading Achievement: Policy Implications." *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 7

(1): 27–34.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2372732219893385>.

Fountas, Irene C., and Gay Su Pinnell. 2012. "Guided Reading: The Romance and the Reality." *The Reading Teacher* 66 (4): 268–84. <https://doi.org/10.1002/TRTR.01123>.

Henry, O. (1908) 2023. "After Twenty Years." In *The Gift of the Magi and Other Stories*, 58–61. American English, U.S. Department of State. <https://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/gift-magi-and-other-stories>.

Murray, Beth, and Spencer Salas. 2014a. "Acting Out Against the Norm: Improvisational Frames and Nolan's Crazy." *Language Arts Journal of Michigan* 30 (1): 53–57. <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.2043>.

Murray, Beth, and Spencer Salas. 2014b. "Sense and Sensibility and the Spaces In-Between: Critical Improvisations with Jane Austen." *English in Texas* 44 (2): 12–16.

Murray, Beth, and Spencer Salas. 2017. "Under Discussion: Teaching Speaking and Listening." *The English Journal* 106 (5): 101–3. <http://www.jstor.org/msm.idm.oclc.org/table/26359504>.

Musetti, Bernadette, Spencer Salas, and Beth Murray. 2016. "Humanizing the Core: English Language Learners and Culturally Sustaining Young Adult Literature." In *Teaching English Language Arts to English Language Learners*, edited by Luciana de Oliveira and Melanie Shoffner, 107–25. Palgrave Macmillan UK. doi:10.1057/978-1-137-59858-5_6.

Richek, Margaret Ann. 1987. "DRTA: 5 Variations That Facilitate Independence in

Reading Narratives.” *Journal of Reading* 30 (7): 632–36.

Salas, Spencer, and Kyra Garson. 2007. “Chifa: Freewriting within a Required Curriculum for Adults.” In *Planning and Teaching Creatively Within a Required Curriculum for Adult Learners*, edited by Anne Burns and Helen de Silva Joyce. TESOL.

Salas, Spencer, Kyra Garson, Shweta Khanna, and Beth Murray. 2016. “Using Freewriting to Make Sense of Literature.” *English Teaching Forum* 54 (2): 12–19. https://americanenglish.state.gov/files/ae/resource_files/etf_54_2_pg12-19.pdf.

Salas, Spencer, Maryann Mraz, Susan Green, and Brian Keith Williams. 2024. “The Line between Questions, Responses, and Readers.” *English Teaching Forum* 62 (1): 16–25. https://americanenglish.state.gov/files/ae/resource_files/62_1_salas_the_line_between..._p16-25.pdf.

Salas, Spencer, Beth Murray, Maryann Mraz, Bishwa Gautam, and Bobbi Siefert. 2019. “‘To Build a Fire’: Creative Frames, Adolescent Readers, and New Words.” *English Teaching Forum* 57 (1): 14–23. https://americanenglish.state.gov/files/ae/resource_files/etf_57_1_14-23.pdf.

Stauffer, Russell G. 1969. *Teaching Reading as a Thinking Process*. Harper & Row.

Spencer Salas is a professor of TESOL at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte’s Cato College of Education.

Blanca Terrazas is the General Director of ICPNA Cusco.