Title: Comprehension of short stories: Effects of task instructions on literary interpretation.
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Strand of work: Basic Studies

Submitted Abstract

An important purpose of reading literature is to move beyond the literal text to construct an interpretation of what the text conveys about the human condition and nature of the world. In two experiments, college students with no prior training in literary analysis read a short story and responded to one of four task instructions (plot, ambiguous, argument, theme) designed to bias either an interpretive or literal stance toward the text. Results indicated that the argument and theme instructions were more likely to lead to essays with more interpretive inferences than plot and ambiguous instructions. Results indicate that stance affected the kinds of inferences that were generated during reading. Implications for expanding current models of text comprehension are discussed.

Purpose and Questions Investigated, Assessments or Tools developed

This research used an experimental manipulation to investigate how a reader's stance (literal vs. interpretive) stance affects the kinds of reasoning demonstrated and amounts of interpretive behavior produced. The study also generated a novel way of categorizing the kinds of inferences that readers generate while reading literary texts.

Research Context or Methodology

Setting and Participants: In Experiment 1, 114 undergraduate students were recruited from an introductory psychology course. In Experiment 2, we used 116 participants from the same subject pool.

Research Design, Data Collection, and Analysis: This paper and pencil task was run in small groups and conditions were randomly assigned to the entire group. We manipulated task instruction to bias readers towards either a literal stance or an interpretive stance. In two experiments, participants read a literary short story and were then asked to write an essay about it. Participants were given one of four essay prompts: plot, argument, theme, ambiguous. The *plot* instruction biased students to adopt a literal stance by asking *What happened in this story?*. The *argument* condition biased the participants toward an interpretive stance by asking them to choose one of two interpretations and to defend this choice with evidence from the text. The *theme* condition also biased readers toward an interpretive stance, but did not offer a given interpretation, instead it simply asked the reading *What is the theme of this story?* Finally, the *ambiguous* instruction asked *What is this text about?* as a means to tapping the reader's representation without a bias toward a particular stance. These essays were scored for paraphrase idea units (restatements of information in the text), text-based inferences

(connections made across parts of the text and/or prior knowledge, but stays within the story world, and interpretive inferences (connections made across parts of the text and/or prior knowledge that speaks to the world at large). A series of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted for total number of idea units as well as each category of idea units.

General statement of findings
These data show that biasing readers toward a literal or interpretive stance affects the kinds of inferences that are generated. The argument and theme conditions yielded essays that were shorter than the plot and ambiguous condition essays. These argument and theme essays, meant to bias an interpretive stance, were dominated by interpretive inference idea units, whereas the plot and ambiguous condition essays were dominated by paraphrase and text-based inference units.

Implications
These data revealed that novice literary readers can produce interpretations of short stories, but that they require explicit instruction to adopt an interpretive stance towards the text. This may suggest that they lack domain-specific knowledge about the nature and purpose of literature.