An analysis is presented of the structure of simple stories, couched in the form of a grammar, consisting of rules defining story units and their relationships. Experience with this structure creates a schema that guides encoding and retrieval. Reanalyses of Bartlett's protocols and new developmental data support the formulation. [The Social Sciences Citation Index® (SSCI®) indicates that this paper has been cited in over 190 publications since 1977.]

"At about this time Dave Rumelhart was working on the notion of a story schema. When I heard him talk about it in one of our departmental seminars, I realized that this sort of analysis could be used not only to differentiate well-structured stories from poorly structured ones, but also to express the ways in which one recall protocol differed from another. What a boon for developmental research! We might be able to say not just that adults remember more than children, but to characterize the qualitative differences, if any, in their recall.

"So, using Rumelhart's work as a base, Nancy Johnson and I began to develop our story grammar. We spent many months trying to formulate a simple and workable, yet comprehensive, set of rules to describe the typical forms of folktales and other stories from the oral tradition. In the process, we found (as had linguists before us) that the same forms occurred repeatedly in the stories of many cultures. Something looking very much like a universal type of structure began to emerge, but one that had psychological, as well as linguistic, significance.

"The Citation Classic described the rules of the grammar and showed that six-year-olds recall stories in ways very similar to adults. Later work showed that when stories are poorly structured, children indeed have trouble in sequencing their recall, but so do adults. People from other cultures also recall stories in the same way—the universals are not just in the form of the texts, but in how they are processed as well.

"This paper has been highly cited for several reasons. The ability to relate a text's structure in a detailed fashion to the way in which it is understood and remembered was new, and led to a great deal of research by developmental, cognitive, and educational psychologists. The ideas espoused in the paper (and in the more recent expansions) also fit in well with the growing interest in schema theory in general, which probably contributed to the article's popularity. Its title may have helped too!"