Language Comprehension

I think we create situation models for almost everything we read because that is how we make sense of what we are reading. I do not, however, believe we do this when reading something highly academic like a scientific article. Situation models involve mental representations, which means we have some kind of prior knowledge or insight into what is being discussed in our reading, but we cannot do that when we are reading something entirely new. On the other hand, I definitely think we make situation models when reading something more narrative like a historical account of a civil war battle. Even if it is a battle we have yet to learn about, we have plenty mental representations about what kinds of things would be going on in a battle based on previous learning and knowledge through media outlets like television and cinema. If the account describes a soldier getting injured, we would likely leap to the conclusion that he will be taken to the infirmary. If the story focuses on a particular person, we will start to feel empathy for them and "root" for their safety and success as we continue to read. There are so many ways to connect with the story in this case, which is why we easily create situation models for narrative text versus academic text that is extremely difficult to connect to. While the previous texts present stark contrast in our ability to create situation models, I think reading instructions for constructing a piece of furniture fall somewhere in between. While this type of technical reading does not necessarily provide something for readers to relate to emotionally, the description of the building process will likely resonate with previous experience of putting stuff together. As Zwaan discussed in his article, we will interpret any indication of space involving pieces and tools and will take to the directions better if they are strictly in chronological order, which they generally are.

Whenever a John Mayer song comes on the radio, my oldest brother, Jack, always makes an effort to say how much he hates him. One day I decided to ask him why he disliked Mayer so much, and I realize now after learning about situation models that this idea took place as Jack was telling me this story. Mayer was playing in Kansas City when Jack was in high school, and we have a friend who is Mayer's half-sister, so Jack was hoping to get to meet Mayer after the show. Our friend, his sister, got Mayer on the phone with Jack and instead of coming out to meet Jack, he challenged Jack to get past his security and to his bus behind the venue, and if Jack did that, then Mayer would talk to him. Jack relayed this story to me in chronological order so I was easily able to understand, and just as if I were reading the story, I began to empathize with my

brother (the protagonist), feeling the anticipation when he first got on the phone and the steadily increasing frustration as he Mayer dared him. Jack's goal, on the phone, was to get backstage, so I leapt to the conclusion that Jack was going to be able to do that, and then backtracked in my mind when he told me that didn't happen. Again, I started to feel some of my brother's disappointment. As he was talking, I tried to imagine Jack in his space, thinking about him possibly trying to make his way to Mayer's bus. In my head, it seemed like an even more impossible task than Jack said it would have been, but nonetheless, his perspective on the situation with Mayer rubbed off on me as I started to adopt his point of view.

I think knowing about situation models helps us evaluate a story's formation and quality. With that information, we may consciously think about the ability to picture what is being said or described in a story, and if we have trouble doing so, we may conclude the story is not well written. This idea pertains to our ability to predict people's opinion about a story, too. Knowing we naturally create situation models, if a story is particularly thrilling, keeping us on "the edge of our seat," or written in a matter in which we are enveloped in the story plot and characters, we would be able to conclude that most people would think those stories are interesting, exciting, or even interesting.