

Improving Reading Comprehension



The RAND reading study group *defines reading comprehension* as the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction. But what does THAT mean? Extracting is decoding. Constructing is comprehending. You have to be able to read the words. Then you have to be able to understand those words.

Over the past three decades we've made reading comprehension synonymous with using reading strategies. This viewpoint has overcomplicated reading comprehension. It is more helpful to think of reading comprehension as an active, interactive, strategic process that occurs before, during, and after reading a piece of text. Let's take a look at what this means.

BEFORE reading a reader sets expectations for the text using what they know about the text and the world. A reader might think:

I see that this is a familiar author. I know the characters in this story!

Oh, this text is historical fiction. I know there's either going to be a fictional character in a real historical place or a real character in a fictional setting.

This book is about whales. I know a lot about whales. Let's see if I learn anything new.

I've never read anything about this subject. I'm going to have to read slowly.

This is not about looking at the front cover and predicting what the text is going to be about. Teachers often do this in the service of activating background knowledge. If you are going to activate background knowledge, it should happen in a targeted way. For example, if you are reading a book about how fish catch their prey with your students, you wouldn't ask "Who has been to the beach?" Instead you would want to ask a more targeted question such as, "Has anyone even been stung by a jellyfish?"



DURING reading the reader’s job is to be in active conversation with the text – the reader should be constantly asking AM I COMPREHENDING? It is during reading that the reader is making a really clear picture in their head about what is going on in the text. Maybe that includes following a storyline, constructing a timeline of key events, or understanding a process. The job of the reader is to make sure that mental picture is clear and complete. And if it’s not, the job of the reader is to care that it isn’t complete, and to work to make it complete. In classrooms, we help children build this skill through talking about what they read. During read alouds we pause and ask questions as a way to model for students the active process of reading a text.

AFTER reading the reader monitors understanding. Have I understood what was read? Do I need to reread? Are there still parts I don’t understand that I need to clarify by talking to someone else or reading something else? This is when the reader makes sure that their mental picture is complete.

We can help children build their comprehension skills by supporting them as they engage actively, intentionally, and strategically with texts.

Teaching Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension instruction should be instruction that supports readers in extracting and constructing meaning. While strategy instruction has played an important role in focusing attention on the idea that we need to teach students to comprehend, too much strategy instruction is far removed from its original purpose — strategy instruction has become the goal — rather than thinking about strategies as a tool to support the end goal of comprehending the texts we read. If a student can ask a bunch of questions about a text but still has no idea what is going on in the text, the student has not comprehended what he or she has read.

In thinking about what strategy instruction should be, there are two important considerations:

1. It might be helpful to shift the discourse from strategies to *strategic* — a teacher’s role in comprehension instruction should be squarely focused on helping students construct meaning from text by helping them understand what it means to be active, strategic readers. Comprehension instruction should be focused on puzzling about text, reading between the lines, relentlessly figuring out what is going on in the text — all because meaning matters and students are working to construct meaning.

We need to teach students to care when comprehension breaks down — when the picture in their head is fuzzy or when they just plain don’t understand. They need to be encouraged to look back when two pieces of information seem contrasting or confusing, and they need to keep track of who the pronoun references are referring to when they

shift from Johnny to he to that guy (all referring to the same person!). They need to know that texts aren't all neatly packaged — or even all that considerate. Constructing meaning takes work! For many students, especially proficient readers, these behaviors come without instruction, but we can't assume that all students will adopt these behaviors if we don't teach them that these behaviors matter. This is what comprehension instruction should be about.

2. We need to stop operating as if the genre and discipline don't matter. Learning a hodge podge of strategies with a bunch of random texts is not going to help students read the world. When they get to their high school history textbook, or are asked to negotiate primary source documents, or have to make sense of complex diagrams in science, generic strategies aren't going to work. Specific genres and disciplines have features that students need to know about, and we should teach this important information explicitly.

Comprehension Strategies

Strategy 1: Text coding

Using photocopied pages that students can write on, have students use a small set of codes to monitor their understanding. Teach students the codes (sample below) and then use these codes to talk about how students are monitoring their understanding. Codes should be applied to each sentence.

✓	Confirms what you already knew – “I knew that!”
-	Contradicts what you thought – “I thought differently.”
?	Confuses you – “I don't understand this.”
+	Something new – I didn't know that!”

Strategy 2: Bird's Eye View

At the end of each paragraph/segment/page, have students write a summary sentence of the most important information, or main idea, of what they just read. Students should state their thinking in their own words. These short statements can serve as the launch point for discussion oriented conversations while also serving as a powerful form of formative assessment of how your students are making meaning while they are reading text.

Strategy 3: Click and Clunk

Click and clunk is an approach focused on teaching students to monitor for understanding sentence by sentence. In this approach, students have to decide, at the end of each sentence, whether the sentence "clicks" (they understand it) or whether it is a "clunk" (they don't understand it). For clunk sentences, students have to then use "fix-it" strategies to try to get "unclunked". By teaching students to actively monitor their own understanding and giving them specific strategies that they can use to repair misunderstanding, comprehension improves. Some teachers even decide to teach their students a quiet signal for clicks and clunks so the teacher can see where comprehension breaks down.

Fix-up strategies:

- 1 -- Reread the sentence with the clunk and look for clues to help you figure out the unknown word. Think about what makes sense.
- 2 -- Reread the sentences before and after the clunk looking for clues about the unknown word.
- 3 -- Look for a prefix or suffix in the unknown word that might help you figure it out.
- 4 -- Break the word apart and look for smaller words that you already know.

Clunks and clues graphic organizer

Clunks: Words or ideas I don't understand or need to know more about:

Clunk 1:
Fix-up strategy used:

Clunk 2:
Fix-up strategy used:

Clunk 3:
Fix-up strategy used:

Clunk 4:
Fix-up strategy used:

Strategy 4: Explicitly teaching close reading strategies

Teaching students to “talk to the text” by numbering paragraphs, underlining, making notes and annotations in the margins can all support active reading and comprehension monitoring.

Strategy 5: Use Read-alouds to Build Comprehension

If you want to improve reading comprehension in your classroom, you should be reading aloud **Every. Single. Day.**

Interactive read alouds are your most powerful tool to support PreK-5 students in developing their reading comprehension skills. There are so many benefits! When you read aloud and ask students really amazing questions, you provide your students with a chance to:

- Engage in conversation about great texts – it is this dialogue that builds comprehension
- Hear a strong model of fluent, expert reading and thinking
- Access grade level content regardless of their decoding abilities

Asking strong text dependent questions requires careful advance planning. Without this careful advance planning teachers resort to questions such as “What is your favorite part?” or “Marie went on a cake walk in this story. Have you been on a cakewalk? That’s not to say that these types of questions can’t be used – but they don’t require any thinking and reasoning about the text for children to answer them and so they are not strong questions to support students’ in developing their comprehension skills.

The bottom line: if you want to shift your reading comprehension outcomes, find some good books and start reading them aloud each day in your elementary classroom.



Conclusion

In the United States, forty-two percent of school-aged children struggle to advance beyond basic levels of reading comprehension. While most students learn to decode text and identify main ideas, many never advance beyond basic levels of comprehension. Students of color and children living in poverty are disproportionately represented within the lowest levels of reading ability, as demonstrated by the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) tests. There is an abundance of knowledge about best practices in reading. Implementation of effective reading comprehension in the classroom can change these statistics and make great reading instruction available for all.