



SUMMARY

When it comes to helping students better understand what they read, there are a number of basic, useful strategies that can be utilized not just by teachers in the classroom but by anyone reading to, or with, a child. Here are 15 of them.

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Comprehension Strategies that Enhance Literacy

Creating a thinking mind is a complex task which requires teachers to model, guide, and monitor their students' ability to read and respond to text, conversation, situations and graphic works. The art of comprehending any concept requires having the ability to integrate what we already know about a topic with new information. It is a skill that requires metacognition — the ability to think about one's own knowledge — and how that knowledge might be refined by learning new information.

Skilled readers and writers need several ingredients in their instructional process in order to become proficient. Foremost, they need a teacher who understands that teaching is an art and a science that requires an understanding of how a student learns, behaves and responds to the classroom experience and how a teacher's classroom management skills and expertise enable learning.

Comprehension is the transaction between the teacher, the student and the text that transforms all those actively engaged in the following activities. The result is understanding the intent of the author.

These strategies have been published by multiple researchers and teachers. I have collected them throughout my teaching career, from graduate courses, conferences and inservice programs, from working alongside colleagues, from the teachers participating in the graduate courses I teach. They may appear to be simplistic, yet when used they do increase comprehension for learners of all ages. These are written for a teacher to use in a classroom setting, but may just as easily be used by anyone reading to or with a child — a parent, day care provider, babysitter or another student. With this article, I give tribute to all the teachers who work with students every day to help them understand their worlds by understanding what they read.

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15 Simple Strategies to Promote Comprehension

In fiction and non-fiction, with readers of any age

1. Set a Purpose

Students need to know why they are reading. Are you reading for fun? To get new information? To confirm something you guessed? To answer a question?

2. Retrieve Prior Knowledge

Teacher asks students to set the context for reading and link the reading to their own experiences. *What do you know about _____?* Or *Tell me everything you think you know about _____.*

3. Make and Confirm Predictions

Students survey the cover and illustrations, and table of contents and make predictions or guesses, supported by details from the cover, to predict what the book will be about.

4. Read Aloud to Students

Teacher models reading aloud, complete with fluency that engages the listener (expression) and thinks out loud to demonstrate how the teacher

thinks as a reader. This encourages students to be actively engaged in listening to the teacher read and then to read with the same level of expression and fluency. This can also be done using tape recorders.

5. Promote a Robust Vocabulary/ Discuss Unknown Words

Teacher uses word walls, index cards, word bingo, personal word lists, word games and writing activities and games to develop rich vocabulary so students will deeply understand text and be able communicate their ideas with precision and interest.

6. Visualize

Teacher leads students to use their imagination to visualize the setting and events in a story or chapter, enabling students to “see” the details and feel the mood the author is trying to convey. Students can compare their “mind pictures” to discover similarities and differences.

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METHODOLOGY

Modeling is the key

“Isabella” I ask “How can you tell that this story takes place a long time ago?” Silence descends upon our small group of readers. Isabella knows the answer, I am certain, but is reluctant to respond. Suddenly, Juan raises his arm, waves his hand enthusiastically and says “I can help Isabella!” Juan continues, “Isabella, look at the pictures. People don’t dress like this anymore. And we don’t live in castles.” I ask Isabella, “What strategy did Juan use to help us get the answer?” She replies, “By comparing what has happened in the story to what we know about. You remember, Mrs. Taylor, don’t you? You do that every time you read to us.” “You are right Isabella. Let’s thank Juan for his help!” Modeling is the key, I remind myself, in teaching how to apply comprehension strategies that enable students to become competent critical thinkers.

Even after reading a picture book, and certainly after reading a text with different points of view, it is important for students to take a position and defend their thoughts relative to text.

15 Simple Strategies to Promote Comprehension (continued)

7. Promote Rereading

Teacher establishes procedure for how students reread to other students, into a tape recorder or to another adult. Rereading text aloud to another leads to greater understanding of the meanings of words, builds fluency and gives the reader another opportunity to have meaningful engagement with the words in print.

8. Use Graphic Organizers

Teacher builds awareness that picture clues and other access features, including graphs, maps, tables and timelines, enable the reader to confirm the meaning gleaned from the text. Students can also construct their own graphic organizers to confirm understandings.

9. Listen to Retellings

One way a teacher knows if a student is grasping the text is to have the student retell the text in his or her own words. Retelling is not rereading but rather, closing the book and telling the story (fiction) or the important facts (non-fiction.) Many misconceptions about meaning can be identified through this strategy.

10. Reinforce Comprehension Skills

Teacher encourages comprehension by asking readers to make inferences, draw conclusions, compare and contrast ideas by using specific examples from the text. This practice helps readers to incorporate new information and revise what they already know.

11. Generate and Answer Questions

Teacher encourages reader logs or journals in which students develop a list of surprising information or events and questions for the author based on the text. They can also begin every reading with the questions: What are you curious about in this story or text? What do you wonder about? What do you need more information about?

12. Relate the Text

Teacher models that reading is about connecting text to your own life by encouraging students to develop a deliberate system for discovering the literal and inferential message in a text. To do this they need to continually relate the text to themselves, the world as they know it and to other texts.

13. Summarize

At every level, from pre-reading books with no words to critical reading of expository text, students can master the skill of selecting the essential elements presented in the text. This requires practice and a guiding hand.

14. Evaluate

Even after reading a picture book, and certainly after reading a text with different points of view, it is important for students to take a position and defend their thoughts relative to text. When teachers model how to make a judgment based on text, they are teaching how to think from two points of view, which further requires recalling important details, character analysis, and authentic details.

15. Respond in Writing

True literacy, or deep understanding of the meaning of a text, is demonstrated when the reader is able to respond in writing to what has been read. When possible, every comprehension lesson should incorporate an opportunity to answer an open-ended question with supportive details from the text, for as John Sheffield, 17th century poet, once wrote, “Of all those arts in which the wise excel, Nature’s chief masterpiece is writing well.”

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