

# Methods of Comprehension Instruction II: Comprehension Strategies

## Chapter Six

### I. Behaviors of Active, Proficient Readers

### II. Active Comprehension Strategies

We know that building independent readers is a lengthy and complicated process that requires explicit instruction in all areas of literacy. Ultimately, our goal is for all students to become active readers who understand any book, poem or article that they read. To truly understand how reading comprehension works, we need to examine each of three hierarchical levels of understanding that readers work through in order to make sense of a text.

#### Related Readings

Along with this chapter, please read the excerpt located in the Related Readings section at the end of this text:

- Put Reading First, pp. 53-66

First, readers have to “retrieve the meaning of each individual word encountered.”<sup>133</sup> This stage of comprehension requires the reader to use phonics and the alphabetic principle efficiently to decode words. To know what those decoded words mean, readers must have a broad vocabulary and the ability to decipher the meaning of unfamiliar words (using morphemic analysis or context clues, as described in the last chapter).

At the next level of reading comprehension, readers “collapse the meanings of individual words they have read into a composite interpretation.”<sup>134</sup> In other words, at certain points in the text, readers must pause to consider the significance of a whole string of words (researchers call this “recoding”). For skilled readers, “these interpretative pauses occur at major syntactic boundaries,” such as the ends of phrases, clauses, sentences, or paragraphs.<sup>135</sup> Possessing fluency and phrasing skills helps the reader know which words cluster together in a meaningful way and when to pause and recode (see chapter four for ways to build students’ fluency).

In the final stage of comprehension, “readers must combine their understanding of the just-interpreted phrase or clause with their overall interpretation of the text so as to revise and update their understanding of what the text means and where it is going.”<sup>136</sup> To fully understand at such a high level, readers have to recall both facts and events from earlier in the text, as well as information that rests entirely outside of the text, in the readers’ own background knowledge. When readers comprehend at this level, we believe that they truly understand what they have read.

Many teachers wonder if the hierarchical nature of these stages suggests that beginning readers, who are just learning to decode individual words, should only receive instruction in phonics and the alphabetic principle. Is it wise to spend instructional time guiding these young students to understand and interpret a whole story when they can’t yet decode most of its individual words? Research continues to mount suggesting that students *benefit greatly* from instruction in reading comprehension beginning in

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<sup>133</sup> Adams, Marilyn Jager. *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990, p. 140.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid* p. 141.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid* p. 141.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid* p. 142.

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Kindergarten.<sup>137</sup> However, while all of our students need explicit instruction in how to understand their reading, the *context* in which that instruction occurs varies according to grade level and student need.<sup>138</sup> For students who are not yet able to read independently, comprehension instruction must occur in the context of a read aloud.

This chapter examines how to teach students to think critically about texts throughout the reading process. We will look at particular **comprehension strategies** that facilitate comprehension, including self-monitoring for meaning, making connections, using text structures, predicting, asking and answering questions, summarizing, visualizing, and inferring. In Part I, we will describe what active, proficient readers do during the reading process and contrast those behaviors with what struggling readers do as they approach texts. In Part II, we will take an in-depth look at the comprehension strategies that help proficient readers process and make sense of their reading.

Decoding				Comprehension				
Book and Print Awareness	Phonological and Phonemic Awareness	Phonics and The Alphabetic Principle	Word and Structural Analysis	Fluency			Background Knowledge	Vocabulary
				Sight Words	Automaticity	Phrasing		
<b>Comprehension Strategies</b>								

### I. Behaviors of Active, Proficient Readers

As conscientious literacy teachers, our big goal is to lead our students to become active, proficient readers. How do we characterize this type of reader? In a broad sense, active readers are those who, while they are reading, constantly ask themselves, “What does this mean?” Active readers know that reading is much more than pronouncing words. They are on a constant quest for understanding and know that arriving at their own interpretation of a text requires a great deal of self-initiated, strategic thinking. Take a look at the following chart that outlines the specific comprehension behaviors of both active and struggling readers:

What Active Readers Do	What Struggling Readers Do
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitor the extent and quality of their understanding</li> <li>• Apply comprehension strategies in order to repair break downs in comprehension</li> <li>• Search for connections between their prior knowledge and the new information they encounter in the texts they read</li> <li>• Ask questions of themselves, the author, and the text as they read</li> <li>• Draw inferences during and after reading</li> <li>• Distinguish important from less important ideas in text</li> <li>• Synthesize information within and across texts and reading experiences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May not realize when comprehension breaks down</li> <li>• When aware that comprehension has broken down, do not know how to apply strategies to repair faulty comprehension</li> <li>• Are unaware that thinking should occur as they read, and read simply as a word call activity</li> <li>• Assume that the author’s interpretations are correct and do not ask many questions of themselves, the author, or the text</li> <li>• Do not “read between the lines” and assume that the meaning is restricted to what is literally written on the page</li> <li>• Are not able to distinguish between important events/facts and details; may emphasize the more interesting ideas over important ones</li> </ul>

<sup>137</sup> Pressley, Michael. “Comprehension Instruction: What Makes Sense Now, What Might Make Sense Soon.” *Handbook of Reading Research: Volume III*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2000. Online at <http://www.readingonline.org/articles/handbook/pressley/index.html>, accessed 7/1/2010.

<sup>138</sup> Block, Cathy Collins and Michael Pressley. *Comprehension Instruction: Research-Based Best Practices*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2002, p. 144.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a purpose for each new reading experience</li> <li>• Adjust speed and strategies for texts of varying genres and levels of difficulty</li> <li>• Successfully apply word attack and context clue strategies when encountering vocabulary with which they are unfamiliar</li> <li>• Visualize details and events in a text to aid comprehension</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approach all new reading experiences the same way, not “prepping” their minds for the new information or setting a purpose</li> <li>• Do not adjust speed and strategies for more difficult texts</li> <li>• Skip or misread unknown vocabulary without stopping to clarify its pronunciation or meaning</li> <li>• Do not visualize details or try to make connections between the text and prior experiences or knowledge</li> </ul>
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The word *active* provides an apt description of proficient readers. While these readers approach a text with the understanding that they will only get out of it what mental energy they put in to it, struggling readers are *passive*, assuming that comprehension just happens as they read words from the page. Passive readers who take such a “hands-off” (or perhaps more appropriately, “brain-off”) approach to reading attribute their comprehension difficulties to innate differences in ability between themselves and proficient readers. You’ll often hear a beginning or struggling reader say, “I’m just not a good reader.” These readers often have no idea of what good readers are actually doing to make meaning. In fact, they think the defining characteristic of good readers is that they “just get it,” with little effort required. Our job as literacy teachers is to ensure that the comprehension process used by proficient readers is not a mystery to our beginning and struggling readers. The next Part of this chapter will examine how we take the mystery out of reading comprehension for all of our students.

## II. Active Comprehension Strategies

If we are to lead our students to take an active stance while reading, then our first task is to guide students to monitor their own comprehension, or as one class of second graders put it, “You’ve got to know when you know, and know when you don’t know.” Beginning and struggling readers need to understand that admitting when understanding breaks down is nothing to be ashamed of—in fact, it is a model behavior of good readers. Our second task is to make students aware that reading for understanding means that we have to *think* while we read and that thinking can happen in a variety of ways depending on the kind of text we are reading, the purpose for our reading, or the type of comprehension problem we are having. Let’s look closely at each of these strategies.

**Comprehension Strategies—Ways of Thinking While Reading.** Researchers have come to understand the wide variety of strategies that readers use to comprehend by asking adult volunteers to “think aloud” as they go through a text. Further studies have found that though comprehension involves more than 30 cognitive and metacognitive processes,<sup>139</sup> good readers use a small handful of these consistently to help them understand what they read.<sup>140</sup> In this section, we will examine eight high-utility comprehension strategies. We will consider the key elements of each strategy and the instructional methods that you will use to ensure that students understand how to use the strategy independently. Additionally, for some strategies, we will provide a window into an elementary literacy classroom to get a glimpse at what excellent strategy instruction looks like in action. The strategies that we will examine include:

- (1) Self-monitoring for meaning
- (2) Making connections
- (3) Using text structures to improve comprehension
- (4) Predicting

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid p.3.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid p. 13.

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- (5) Asking and answering questions
- (6) Summarizing
- (7) Visualizing
- (8) Making inferences

**Self-Monitoring for Meaning—Knowing When You Know and When You Don't.** From the earlier table comparing active and struggling readers, we know that struggling readers do not realize when their reading comprehension breaks down. Before any other type of comprehension instruction can happen, we have to be sure that we have made our students aware that good readers consistently monitor themselves while moving through texts, and that our students are increasingly able to demonstrate that they know when they understand and when they don't.

Of course, you will model this for your students, stopping during a read aloud to say, "You know, I don't think I understood that last bit. It didn't really make sense to me. I need to do something to fix my problem." You'll stop a student during an independent reading conference to ask, "Do you understand that?" And finally, after much modeling and prompting, you will congratulate your students on being excellent thinkers when they look up at you with furrowed brows and say, "I don't get this."

The next instructional step, of equal importance as the first, is to teach students *how* to fix a problem they've identified in their comprehension. And to do that, you will model specific strategies, such as rereading the confusing part or continuing to read to see if something further on in the text will clear up their confusion. But before students can fix a comprehension problem, they have to know it's there. Therefore, teaching students to monitor for meaning and assessing whether or not they are doing it should be a major focus of your reading instruction, particularly at the beginning of the school year.

**Making Connections.** Proficient readers make connections between what they are reading in a book or article and their own background knowledge of the topic or central theme. We categorize these connections as *text-to-self* (a connection between the reading and the reader's personal life), *text-to-text* (a connection between two texts), and *text-to-world* (a connection between a text and a reader's world knowledge) and help students to know that all types of connections are useful if they relate to the central concept of the book.

Not surprisingly, some texts lend themselves to deep, meaningful connections more than others. For this reason, it is important to choose texts carefully as students begin using this comprehension strategy. This is true both for texts that you will read aloud and for those students will read in a shared setting. If you want to model using text-to-self connections to enhance understanding, then you have to choose a book to which you can connect in an authentic way. Texts that comment on common human experiences are often good candidates for text-to-self connections; books by Patricia Polacco, who writes about her own childhood and family experiences, are excellent selections. Collections of texts that share a similar theme or lesson, that use similar formats or

*I've spent a lot of time this year teaching my students how to make profound connections and distinguish between an ordinary connection and a profound one. In previous years, I would hear a lot of connections like, "I'm 11 years old, just like Stanley from the book." I knew my students could go deeper with their connections and I knew that if they did, their comprehension and love of reading would dramatically improve. After introducing and modeling basic connections, we went deeper. When Ivan said that profound connections were when you stopped reading and thought hard about the book and your life and Roxana followed up by saying that you had to give details to explain your connection, we were on our way to a common definition of profound connections. For elementary students this is deep, critical thinking that they are capable of and that, I hope, will remain with them for the rest of their lives.*

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structure, or that are written by the same author help students make meaningful text-to-text connections (in addition to *Yoko* and *Oliver Button is a Sissy*, students might read *Arnie and the New Kid*, *William's Doll*, and *Odd Velvet*.) To help students make rich text-to-world connections, choose books that relate to world events and problems.

To understand how you might begin to guide your students to make text-to-self connections, consider the following snapshot of first grade teacher Debbie Miller's classroom during Read Aloud:

It was early in the school year. The windows were still open wide to the late summer breezes. Debbie held in her lap *The Two of Them* by Alike, a book rich in connections to her own life. She decided a central concept for the book, and therefore the focus of her modeling or think-alouds, is the idea of oral narrative as a way to preserve a family's history.

Debbie began. "Okay, you guys, this is how it's going to work. When I'm reading, you'll see me looking at the book and showing you the pictures like I always do. I'm going to read the book all the way through one time. Then, I'll go back, and as I reread, you'll see me stop and think aloud about some things I know or have experienced that are like the book in some way. I'll probably look up at the ceiling, so you'll know I'm telling you what I was just thinking as I read the book."

Debbie read through the book once and then began to reread Alike's book about a young child and her grandfather and how their roles reverse as he ages and eventually dies.

She read six pages before stopping to look up. "When I read this part about the grandfather singing songs and telling his granddaughter stories of long ago," Debbie said, "I remember my own grandfather. He used to gather all the grandchildren around him and tell us the stories that were true for our family, just like the grandpa in this book. It was like he wanted us to know those stories before he died, and he was afraid if he didn't tell them, they might be forgotten forever. When I read those words, I could see all of us sitting around him. There were too many grandchildren to sit in his lap like the little girl in this book, but he told us stories about my mom and my aunts and uncles. And you know what? When I had children, I told them those same stories so they would remember all the different people in my family." Debbie closed the book on her lap for a moment to show she was shifting gears.

"When a book makes me think of my own life," Debbie said, "I'm making text-to-self connections—you know, connections from the text or book to myself."

She stopped to write *text-to-self* on the far left side of a six-foot length of horizontally hung chart paper labeled *Making Schema Connections* (schema refers to background knowledge) that hung on the wall nearby. She wrote the title of the book under the *text-to-self* connections heading and put her initials by it.

Debbie continued reading, pausing two more times to think aloud about text connections to herself. By the time she finished, the children stared intently at her, as if she just surgically opened her head so that they could look inside to see how her brain works. They were captivated by this simple demonstration... many glimpsed, for the first time that day, the thinking processes of a proficient reader.

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(Several days later)... Referring to *The Two of Them*, she told her students that, by thinking about her own grandfather, she could imagine how the little girl felt when her grandfather held her on his lap for stories, and how the little girl must have felt later when the grandfather died. Debbie told the class, “By remembering my own feelings, I could imagine what the little girl—the character—in this book might have felt. Because I understand the character’s feelings, I understand the story better. It makes more sense to me and means more to me.”<sup>141</sup>

Notice how Debbie is deliberate in:

- Her text choice (“a book rich in connections to her own life”),
- Her explanation of how she’ll think aloud (“I’ll probably look up at the ceiling, so you’ll know I’m telling you what I was just thinking as I read the book”),
- Her description of the strategy (“When a book makes me think of my own life, I’m making text-to-self connections—you know, connections from the text or book to myself.”), and
- Her clarification of how the strategy helped her understand the book (“By remembering my own feelings, I could imagine what the little girl in this book might have felt. Because I understand the character’s feelings, I understand the story better. It makes more sense to me and means more to me.”).

This level of explicitness is necessary if our students are going to internalize how to use a strategy to help them understand what they read.

**Using Text Structures to Improve Comprehension.** Research has repeatedly shown that when students understand how different types of texts are structured, they are better able to understand the information read within. Imagine how difficult it would be to understand a magazine article if you didn’t know to read the text on the page before examining a related graph, or how frustrating it would be to attempt to make sense of a comic strip in the Sunday paper if you were unaware of the function of dialogue bubbles! Knowing how a text is organized helps students to read in a more purposeful and efficient fashion.

Children are sensitive to the narrative structure of a story (characters, setting, problem, etc.); studies have found that even preschool age children are able to use these narrative elements to help them comprehend.<sup>142</sup> Nevertheless, many beginning readers, and all struggling readers, need explicit guidance in identifying and analyzing elements of narrative story structure. Many teachers organize these elements visually through a graphic organizer called a story map. After modeling use of a story map during Read Aloud, beginning and struggling readers will be able to use it independently to build comprehension of narratives.

The structure of expository texts is less intuitive for children and thus, must be taught directly. Consider how Shannen Coleman (Baltimore ’03) and Diana Filo (Baltimore ’04), using suggestions from Debbie Miller’s *Reading with Meaning*, helped their second grade students understand and use nonfiction text features:

We began the nonfiction unit by asking our students to compare fiction and nonfiction Big Books that we read during Read Aloud. We used a Venn diagram to record students’ observations about the features, purposes, and ways of reading both types of texts. Next,

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<sup>141</sup> Keene, Ellin Oliver and Susan Zimmermann. *Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader’s Workshop*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997, pp. 56-57.

<sup>142</sup> Joanna P. Williams. *Comprehension Instruction: Research-Based Best Practices*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2002, p. 127.

we asked our students to work in small groups and classify a text as fiction or nonfiction, being sure to explain their decisions.

Our next step was to help our students understand how to predict what you might learn from a nonfiction text by skimming the cover, table of contents, and some of the pages. We asked students to skim several Big Books and make a prediction as to what they would learn if they went looking for information in that particular book.

The next stage of instruction was lengthy. Each day, we examined one text feature, including labels, photographs, captions, comparisons, maps, types of print, headings, graphs, tables of contents, indexes, and glossaries. If the focus for the day was on types of texts, we would choose a Big Book that had examples of words in bold print or italics and explain how the feature helped us understand better—in this case, by drawing our attention to the most important words or ideas. On a big chart, we recorded the text feature and how it helped us understand our nonfiction reading.

In Shared Reading, we guided our students to examine a copy of a nonfiction trade book, found the text feature in question, and talked about how it helped them understand the text. The students *loved* these books and were very engaged as they read about *Rollercoaster Science* and the inner workings of an *Ice Cream Factory*. Additionally, we asked our students to create a nonfiction text notebook to record an example of each text feature. For instance, when we learned about photographs and captions, our students pasted a photograph of their choosing on a page of their notebook and wrote a caption to give more information about it. In this way, our students created a reference book for themselves of all the nonfiction features we studied.

To determine whether our students' reading comprehension improved, we gave them weekly assessments that measured how well they were able to use the text features we had studied that week to understand a short expository text. We asked questions like, "On what page could you find information about centrifugal force?" that required students to use a particular text feature (the Table of Contents or index) to complete the task. The unit was very successful; our students were engaged and became much better at understanding nonfiction books and articles. Now, nonfiction books are among the most popular selections in our classroom libraries!

Teaching students to understand the structure of expository texts makes this kind of reading less intimidating for students. Given the natural curiosity of most elementary school students, their desire to read nonfiction will skyrocket if you provide them with a rich understanding of how this type of text works—and how to make it work for them. For an example of a page from a student's nonfiction text notebook, see the **Elementary Literacy Toolkit** (p. 46: "Sample Products: Evidence of Strategic Thinking About Reading"); this Toolkit can be found online at the Resource Exchange on TFANet. ✖

### **Making Predictions**

Predicting is a way of thinking, related to making connections and inferring, that asks readers to use what they know about a genre, a character, a particular story structure, an author, or a historical or common human experience to make an intelligent guess about what might happen in a story or what they might learn from an informational text. Readers can make predictions before they begin reading as well as during their reading. Lead your students to understand that predicting helps the reader to stay involved in understanding and enjoying their reading.

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Predicting comes almost naturally to many readers. However, we can push our students to make sophisticated predictions that require them to think critically about the text by asking them to explain the thinking behind their prediction. For instance, a second grader who reads *Stephanie's Ponytail* by Robert Munsch might predict that all of the students in Stephanie's class will copy her latest hairstyle—a side ponytail. Instead of letting that very valid prediction stand, the teacher should challenge the student to explain why she made the prediction, forcing her to connect her guess to the predictable pattern of this story (the students *always* wear their hair exactly as Stephanie does, regardless of how ridiculous the styles become). A fourth grader reading *The Gold Cadillac* by Mildred Taylor might predict that Daddy will experience some sort of trouble when he drives his fancy car into Mississippi and explain this prediction by noting the setting of the book (the Deep South in the 1950s) and his own background knowledge of that time period (African Americans were discriminated against and expected to defer to white people during the Jim Crow era).

Additionally, we need to make clear for students that good readers are constantly confirming or revising their predictions while they read. By pausing during reading to ask students if they are surprised by what is happening in a story or if what they are learning in an informational article differs from what they expected to learn, we encourage them to “revise and update their understanding of what the text means and where it is going,”<sup>143</sup> evidence of high level thinking.

For a more complete example of a lesson about predicting, you may want to turn back to chapter two of this text and reread the Shared Reading classroom snapshot that described students making predictions about *The Tortoise and the Hare*.

For an example of work that students might produce as they predict, see the online **Elementary Literacy Toolkit** (p. 47: “Sample Products: Evidence of Strategic Thinking About Reading”). ✕

### Asking and Answering Questions

Many of our beginning and struggling readers, having assumed that good readers are never confused about the meaning of a book, are shocked to learn that good readers always have questions about their reading. This misunderstanding moves asking and answering questions near the top of the metacognitive strategies that we can teach our students to use. The following key ideas will help your students understand the strategy and how it helps reading comprehension:

- Good readers ask questions before, during, and after their reading.
- Questions have different purposes; some attempt to clarify the meaning of a part of text, others are used to wonder about what will happen, and still others help the reader to speculate about the author's intent, style, content, or format.<sup>144</sup>
- Some questions can be answered by referring back to the text, while others require the reader to make an inference. Sometimes, you can answer a question by asking someone else to share information in his or her background knowledge or by consulting an outside source (like a dictionary or other reference material).
- Good readers ask questions to focus on parts of the text that are most important to understand or to be aware of the parts that are most difficult for them to understand.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Adams, Marilyn Jager. *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990, p. 142.

<sup>144</sup> Keene, Ellin Oliver and Susan Zimmermann. *Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader's Workshop*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997, p. 110.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid* p. 114.

Once you have encouraged students to ask questions, you will probably find that they have a million! And because no reader has time to answer all of his or her questions, it's important to teach students how to identify those that are most central to an understanding of the reading. For Kindergarten through second grade students, it's helpful to ask them to pick a "burning question," one that they *must* spend time thinking and talking about in order to better understand their reading. After the class has selected a "burning question," lead them to decide how they might find an answer to that question. For questions about fiction, you might point out to students that often, the most interesting and important questions are those that we can't answer simply by looking back in the text, but must be inferred.

Additionally, you might help upper elementary students distinguish between thick questions (those that are about large, global matters) and thin questions (those that seek clarification of minor points).<sup>147</sup> Thick questions often begin with *why* and *how come* or could address large content area issues, such as "Why was the Boston Tea Party important?" Thin questions, such as "What year did the Boston Tea Party happen?" can often be answered with a short, simple response. Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis, authors of *Strategies that Work*, recommend having students write their thick questions on large sticky notes and their thin questions on smaller sticky flags to help them "separate broad concepts from smaller issues of clarification."<sup>148</sup>

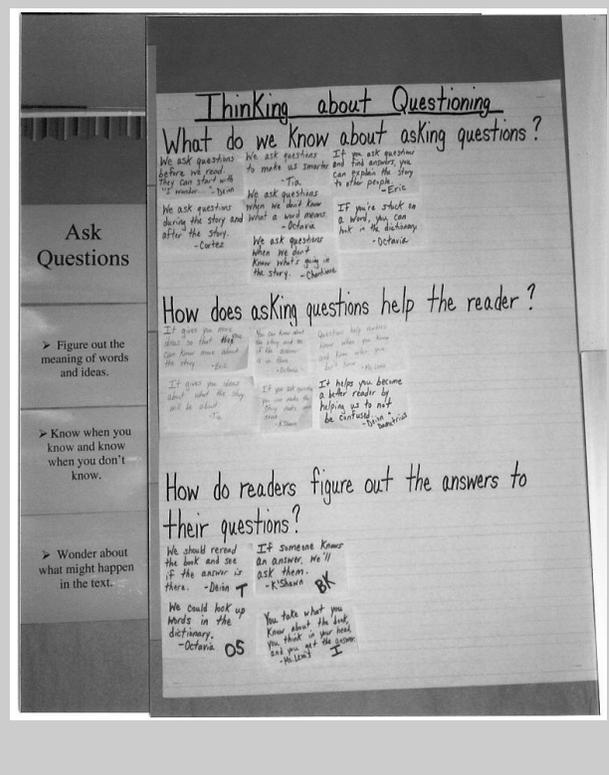
By gradually teaching students to ask questions, to identify how they can find the answers to their questions, and to determine which questions are most important for understanding, we can ensure that students have one more tool to use as they think strategically about their reading.

### Summarizing

Teaching students to summarize, first an individual paragraph and then an entire story or article, helps them to "discern and stress the most important ideas, minimize less relevant details, and remove redundant ideas."<sup>149</sup> Once students are able to summarize, they will also possess a whole host of important skills, such as the ability to determine what's important in a text, to comprehend the essence of a passage, and to remember and retell what they have read.

To truly know whether students have "gotten the gist" of what they have read, many teachers ask them to write a summary in their own words. Fifth graders reading an article from an informational magazine like

Sample Anchor Chart Created During *Asking and Answering Questions Strategy Unit*<sup>146</sup>



<sup>146</sup> Miller, Debbie. *Reading with Meaning: Teaching Comprehension in the Primary Grades*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers, 2002, p. 127.

<sup>147</sup> Harvey, Stephanie and Anne Goudvis. *Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension to Enhance Understanding*. Maine: Stenhouse Publishers, 2000, p. 89.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid p. 90.

<sup>149</sup> Trabasso, Tom and Edward Bouchard. *Comprehension Instruction: Research-Based Best Practices*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2002, p. 182.

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*Time for Kids* might write a summary sentence on a sticky note and attach it to the appropriate section of text.<sup>150</sup> In a reading response journal, fourth graders might separate a page into two columns, identifying the topic or subtopic on the left-hand side, and the important supporting details on the right. By reading students' written summaries, you can determine if they are identifying the most important ideas or simply noting those that they find most interesting.

### Visualizing

When readers visualize, or as we might say to first graders, "draw pictures in our minds," they create an image that is "sparked by the text, but anchored in one's background knowledge."<sup>151</sup> Make students aware that illustrators use this particular comprehension strategy when they receive the author's text and decide which pictures should accompany it, but that none of us have to be exemplary artists to draw pictures in our minds. In addition to increasing our enjoyment and understanding of a text, research suggests that the imagery created during reading creates a visual "memory representation of the reader's interpretation of text."<sup>152</sup>

When students are just beginning to visualize, it helps to offer specific suggestions for when they might make a mental picture, such as, "Make pictures in your mind about what's happening right now in the story," "Make pictures in your mind about this particular character," or "Make pictures in your mind about what we're learning about the water cycle." Of course, asking your students to sketch their mental images will help you assess their comprehension and will be fun for them.

Make your students aware that each person's mental images are unique and valid because all of us have unique experiences and background knowledge that influence what we see in our minds as we read. If you doubt the power of an individual's visual interpretation, think about what often happens when you watch a movie that is based on a book that you love and have read many times. You probably leave that movie thinking, "That's not what that character looks like, or sounds like, at all!" because you had imagined things differently. Teaching our students to visualize during reading helps them to create their own interpretations and permanently connect a book or a character to the images they have created.

### Making Inferences

As Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis tell us, "Inferring is the bedrock of comprehension, not only in reading... Inferring is about reading faces, reading body language, reading expressions and reading tone, as well as reading text."<sup>153</sup> Teaching students to infer is one of the most powerful tools to use as we help students become active, proficient readers. When students know how to use their background knowledge to examine textual clues, they can extrapolate a meaning that is not explicitly stated. Particularly for deep, thought-provoking literature, the meaning of a passage is almost always hidden "between the lines," and students will only be able to understand that meaning if they are adept enough at making inferences to read between those lines.

Consider the following example, taken from *Strategies that Work*, of two teachers (Steph and Jennifer) guiding their fifth grade students to make inferences about *Tight Times* by Barbara Shook Hazen. This

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<sup>150</sup> Harvey, Stephanie and Anne Goudvis. *Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension to Enhance Understanding*. Maine: Stenhouse Publishers, 2000, p. 148.

<sup>151</sup> Keene, Ellin Oliver and Susan Zimmermann. *Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader's Workshop*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997, p. 141.

<sup>152</sup> Trabasso, Tom and Edward Bouchard. *Comprehension Instruction: Research-Based Best Practices*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2002, p. 179.

<sup>153</sup> Harvey, Stephanie and Anne Goudvis. *Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension to Enhance Understanding*. Maine: Stenhouse Publishers, 2000, p. 105.

picture book tells the story of a young boy whose desperate desire for a dog is overshadowed by the tension that exists within his family after his dad loses his job.

On this day, Steph read *Tight Times* while the kids crowded around on the floor with clipboards and pencils at the ready. She held up the cover of the book, which shows a boy with a plate of lima beans, his fork two inches from his mouth holding one lonely lima which he refuses to even look at. Knowing that covers and illustrations are a good place to start with inferring, Steph asked what they could infer from the cover.

"He doesn't like those beans," Curtis answered. "How do you know?" Steph asked. "Look at his face and how he won't put the fork in his mouth," Curtis said. "Yeah, and his plate is still full of beans," D.J. added as the others nodded.

"What does *Tight Times* mean?" Les asked. This proved tougher. No one seemed to have adequate background knowledge for this term. Steph hung up a large piece of chart paper and divided it into two columns, one headed **Quote or Picture from Text** and the other headed **Inference**. "Let's read the story and find out," she suggested. "We'll record the information here as we find it." After hearing several pages, Audra burst out, "I've got it! 'Tight times' is when you don't have enough money to do the stuff you want to do."

"Good thinking, Audra. Did the author tell you that?" Steph asked. "No, not exactly." "So, how did you know?" Steph asked. "I sort of guessed it when his dad said they didn't get roast beef anymore and his mom went back to work because of tight times," Audra answered. "She inferred it," Curtis said. "That she did, Curtis. Let's record it on the chart," Steph suggested. Audra came up and wrote her response on the chart.

When Curtis came upon a picture near the end of the story of the dad reading the want ads, he headed up to the chart and wrote that the dad was going to get a new job. When Jennifer asked Curtis how he knew that, he answered, "Because he's got a smile on his face in that picture and he's a hardworking guy. I'm predicting it."

"Right on, Curtis," Jennifer told him. At that point, she and Steph released the kids to work in pairs as the teachers moved about the room, eavesdropped, and chatted with individuals who were working their way through the text and responding on an identical form on their clipboards. The kids relied on both pictures and text to predict outcomes, infer ideas, and construct meaning in the story.<sup>154</sup>

For an example of work that students might produce as they begin to infer, see the **Elementary Literacy Toolkit** (p. 48: "Sample Products: Evidence of Strategic Thinking About Reading"); this Toolkit can be found online at the Resource Exchange on TFiANet. ✖

Clearly, teaching our students to infer, as well as to use the other comprehension strategies we've described, will lead them to become the kind of independent, active readers who are able to arrive at their own interpretations of many different texts. Thus far in the chapter, we have considered the behaviors of active, proficient readers and how to teach our students to think strategically while they read. The table on the following page serves to review these strategies, and to clarify when in the reading process they are used.

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid pp. 107-108.

## Comprehension Strategies

Strategy	Description	Stage of reading in which strategy is used		
		Before	During	After
<b>Self-Monitoring</b>	Assessing your comprehension of text		x	x
<b>Making Connections</b>	Connecting what you are reading with what you already know—from your own life, another text, or the world	x	x	x
<b>Using Text Structures</b>	Understanding how different types of texts are structured and using those structures to help you understand your reading	x	x	x
<b>Predicting</b>	Using your background knowledge and what you know about a text (its genre, characters, or story structure) to determine what might happen or what you might learn	x	x	
<b>Asking and Answering Questions</b>	Asking a question to help clarify meaning and determining what kind of thinking will help you arrive at an answer	x	x	x
<b>Summarizing</b>	Restating the most important information in a text, often in written form		x	x
<b>Visualizing</b>	Using the images you create in your mind to help you understand		x	x
<b>Inferring</b>	Using your background knowledge and textual clues to interpret the meaning of text	x	x	x

### Teaching Students to Become Strategic Thinkers

Now that we've considered particular comprehension strategies, let's examine how to teach students to use them. Not surprisingly, comprehension strategy instruction is no different than excellent instruction in other areas and follows the same steps as all direct instruction lessons (explain the strategy explicitly, model using the strategy, allow students to practice it with support, and provide opportunities for students to apply the strategies to their own reading).

To begin, **describe the strategy** in everyday language and **explain how it helps readers** better understand their reading. Next, **model using the strategy** by reading aloud and pausing your oral reading to "think aloud." Thinking aloud is a way of sharing how you are thinking at particular points during reading to make seemingly invisible mental processes visible to students; it allows students to "get inside the head" of a proficient reader. As you explain and use a particular comprehension strategy with your students, keep track of their thinking by **creating anchor charts** (such as the example in our discussion of the asking and answering questions strategy) "that children can refer to, add to, or change over the course of the year."<sup>155</sup>

After modeling the strategy and thinking aloud for students, **gradually involve them** in using it. Students of all grade levels will share their thinking by engaging in conversations, with the teacher serving as facilitator. For Kindergarten through early second graders, Read Aloud will be *the context* in which they practice thinking strategically about text, for a number of reasons. First, as we have discussed previously, beginning readers must devote all of their cognitive energy to decoding print and reading fluently. Asking these students to decode *and* practice using a comprehension strategy will frustrate both their attempts to decode and their attempts to understand. Second, the books that these earlier readers can decode are often not suitable for in-depth strategic thinking. Truly, there is only so much thinking to be done with a

<sup>155</sup> Miller, Debbie. *Reading with Meaning: Teaching Comprehension in the Primary Grades*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers, 2002, p. 12.

decodable text about an everyday experience that follows a predictable pattern. (A book about winter weather might read, “I put on my hat. I put on my gloves. I put on my coat.” There is little critical and inferential thought required of the reader in order to understand this kind of story.)

Though our primary students will practice strategic thinking during Read Aloud only, beginning in the middle of second grade, students should also practice using comprehension strategies during Shared and Independent Reading. Some of the best **guided instruction** of comprehension strategies happens when teachers “lift” short sections of texts from longer books or articles, make that snippet visible for all students (by

displaying it on the overhead or chart paper, or by making a photocopy for each student), and guide students to “reason through” the meaning of that lifted snippet by engaging them in conversation.<sup>157</sup> Though students may write in a response journal or use a graphic organizer as they think, the class conversation to “reason through” a text is perhaps the most powerful method of building students’ understanding of what they’ve read.

A word of caution about how you emphasize these strategies. Do not lose sight of the fact that strategies are a

*Teaching metacognitive skills is an important literacy skill. Students need to understand how they think about reading. One way that I do this is to model my thought process when I am reading. Each morning, I read to students for twenty minutes. I stop periodically throughout the story, hold a paper light bulb above my head to show that I am thinking out loud, and begin to talk to myself about what I read. The kids love this!*

**David Jernigan,**  
Executive Director, KIPP Schools

### A Teacher Think-Aloud, Visualizing During Reading

The teacher reads aloud a portion of a short story, *The Desert Man*, and thinks aloud about the mental images that are sparked by the text. Below, the text (**bold print**) is interspersed with the teacher’s think aloud (*in italics*).

*The title of the story is **The Desert Man**... I have a pretty good picture in my mind of what the desert looks like. Miles and miles of sand, blazing hot, very little vegetation.*

**The old man was hot and tired. His long white robe billowed in the dry desert wind.**

*My picture in my head is of a very old man... He is dressed in a long white robe, and the material must be light enough to be blown by the wind. I can see his robe blowing in the wind.*

**He wiped his brow as he started to trudge up yet another of the endless dunes of the desert. He saw only and sea of sand surrounding him.**

*I can see in my own mind what the old man sees... miles and miles of hot desert... perhaps he is wiping his brow because he is so tired and weary.*

**The sun beat down on him mercilessly. He would not give up. He knew the camp was near.**

*The look on the old man’s face is very clear to me now. He has a look of determination on his face. He is very determined to make it to the camp.<sup>156</sup>*

means to an end: improved reading comprehension. As reading researchers Sinatra, Brown, and Reynolds explain, “Teachers can help students put strategy use in its proper place by minimizing its ‘trappings’ (e.g., numerous and/or intricate steps, written products) and by focusing on how the strategy aids comprehension. It may also help to remind students that the goal is to make sense of what the read and that the strategy is just a tool they can use to make that happen.”<sup>158</sup> Ask your students to explain how using a particular strategy helps them to understand their reading and look for evidence of increased reading comprehension in your student’s written and oral responses to books, articles, or textbooks.

<sup>156</sup> Gambrell, Linda B. and Patricia S. Koskinen. *Comprehension Instruction: Research-Based Best Practices*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2002, p. 313.

<sup>157</sup> Harvey, Stephanie and Anne Goudvis. *Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension to Enhance Understanding*. Maine: Stenhouse Publishers, 2000, pp. 32-35.

<sup>158</sup> Sinatra, Gale M., Kathleen J. Brown and Ralph E. Reynolds. *Comprehension Instruction: Research-Based Best Practices*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2002, p. 71.

## Comprehension Strategies

Finally, you will continually **check for student understanding** and increased reading comprehension. Initially, you might ask third through fifth graders to produce concrete evidence of successful strategy use. For example, students might use a Venn diagram to record connections they believe exist between two short stories, or they might draw the pictures that they are visualizing in their head while reading poetry. However, “as students become more proficient at strategy use, fade out requirements.”<sup>159</sup> Keep in mind the following advice from reading researchers:

Ongoing requirements for students to demonstrate their use of the strategy overtly may keep them focused on its deliberate use. This may actually interfere with the development of automatic comprehension processes. After all, expert readers do not produce concrete evidence of strategy use every time they encounter a text; in fact, they may do so only under duress. With this in mind, once students develop satisfactory prowess at the tasks that demonstrate strategy use, teachers should fade out task requirements. From then on, assessment should center on students’ comprehension of texts that lend themselves to the use of a particular strategy.<sup>160</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter surveyed a wide variety of comprehension strategies that can be used at different points during the reading process to help develop students into strategic thinkers who comprehend their reading.

- Our goal is for our students to become active, proficient readers who self-monitor for meaning, recognize when comprehension breaks down, and know what to do to improve a shallow or incomplete understanding of a text.
- To help students to think critically about texts, teach them to self-monitor for meaning, make connections between prior knowledge and the text, use text structures to improve comprehension, make predictions, ask and answer questions, summarize, visualize, and make inferences.
- Help students to realize that understanding our reading begins before we open the book and continues well after we have read the last page. Teach students to think strategically before, during, and after reading.
- Teach students to think strategically about text by describing strategies explicitly, modeling and thinking aloud about our own reading, creating anchor charts to track our students’ thinking, guiding our students to think critically about texts by lifting parts of texts and “reasoning through” them in class conversations, and by checking for student understanding, use of the strategies, and improved reading comprehension.

*I was shocked to discover that direct instruction could be effective to teach higher-level comprehension skills to my second and third graders. Somehow my modeling of predicting, clarifying, making connections, etc. while I read has sunk in. When I asked my students to read a story on their own and record their thinking on post-it notes in the margins of their books, I was astonished (and pleased) at how much they had gotten and how independently they were able to demonstrate these skills.*

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid p. 72.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.