

# Helping All Students Become Independent Readers

## Chapter Three

- I. Reflecting on Our Own Comprehension Strategies
- II. Characteristics of Independent Readers
- III. Characteristics of Struggling Readers
- IV. Moving Students from Struggling to Independent

### Introduction

Thursday, end of period, U.S. history class:

*“Ok class, for homework, you’re going to read pages 214 – 229 of Chapter 9, the section on the New Deal, and answer questions 1-3, 6, and 10 at the end of the chapter. We’ll have a short quiz at the beginning of the period and then we’ll have a class discussion. Come prepared to discuss! See you tomorrow.”*

Friday, beginning of period, U.S. history class:

*While students complete the ten-question quiz, Mr. Brunell quickly flips through the homework students slid into their section’s inbox as they entered the room. “Good,” he thinks, “most of them wrote down at least basic responses.” The timer dings and he collects the 10-question quizzes to be graded later. “Ok class, let’s talk about what you read last night about the New Deal. First, some basics – who introduced it, when did it happen, what did it involve?” At the front, Joe raises his hand and answers, “Franklin Roosevelt introduced it in the mid 1930’s.” “Ok, good,” Mr. Brunell responds, “Now someone explain some of the major effects the New Deal had on our country.” Silence. At the back, Patrick asks, “Can we open our books?” Mr. Brunell acquiesces, and students slowly flip open their books. Heads remain bowed while fingers scan down the paragraphs. “Come on class, you all read this last night and just had a quiz on it.” Mr. Brunell begins to pose question after question, but the only response is silence. “What cataclysmic event in US History led to the introduction of the new deal? What government agencies were created as a result? This is an interesting one - what branch of our government did Roosevelt try to expand when legislation connected to the New Deal was deemed unconstitutional?” Silence. A few students share responses such as, “The New Deal created the Tennessee Valley Authority” and “The New Deal created more jobs in road construction through the Civilian Conservation Corps,” clearly quoting directly from the textbook and demonstrating limited understanding. Sighing, Mr. Brunell begins to lecture on the introduction and implications of the New Deal. Later, he grades their quizzes and is disappointed by their low scores. “These kids just can’t read,” he laments.<sup>64</sup>*

Many secondary content area teachers don’t anticipate the responsibility of teaching students to comprehend texts. As we ourselves may have been taught, we assign pages 214 – 229 in the textbook, or pass out a photocopy of a newspaper article to be read for homework. We expect students to come to class the next day having read, comprehended, and analyzed the text and ready to actively participate in a class discussion. Assigning content area reading in this traditional way assumes that students are already effective readers with an arsenal of reading comprehension strategies to draw upon when engaging with texts. This assumption may be far from reality, as the fictional but representative vignette above illustrates. As explained in *Reading Next*, and quoted in an earlier chapter, “older struggling readers...lack the strategies to help them comprehend what they read. Such strategies include the ability

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<sup>64</sup> Vignette modeled after Daniels, Harvey and Steven Zemelman. *Subjects Matter: Every Teacher’s Guide to Content-Area Reading*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004, p. 6.

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to grasp the gist of a text, to notice and repair misinterpretations, and to change tactics based on the purposes of reading. Other struggling readers may have learned these strategies but have difficulty using them because they have only practiced using them with a limited range of texts and in a limited range of circumstances.”<sup>65</sup>

In this chapter, we will begin by putting our own reading strategies under the microscope in order to shed light on what it means to be an “independent reader.” Hopefully this will make visible the usually invisible comprehension strategies you, as an independent reader, most likely have been applying while reading this text, and probably would have employed had you been assigned the passage on the New Deal.<sup>66</sup> We’ll then discuss how an independent reader differs from the “struggling reader” we may encounter in our classrooms. Finally, we will explore teacher “think alouds,” one overarching strategy for explicitly teaching reading comprehension strategies to move struggling readers toward independence.

Decoding				Comprehension		
Book and Print Awareness	Phonemic and Phonological Awareness	The Alphabetic Principle and Phonics	Word Recognition	Fluency	Background Knowledge	Vocabulary
						Comprehension Strategies

### I. Reflecting on Our Own Comprehension Strategies

As you are aware from early chapters, the sweeping generalization made by our fictitious Mr. Brunell in a moment of frustration, is just that, a sweeping generalization. As we discussed in chapter one, “reading” has several distinct layers that must be pulled apart in order to fully understand (1) what it means to read and (2) the different layers of support we might need to provide for students who are struggling with reading. Our U.S. history vignette above describes students who are certainly not lacking book/print awareness, and are most likely not struggling with decoding the words on the page, but are rather struggling with *comprehension*. So, the question becomes, what strategies do good readers use to comprehend a text, and how do we teach those strategies to our struggling readers?

Interestingly, as part of answering these questions, many reading researchers cite a close and synergistic relationship between researching comprehension strategies and reflecting on their own comprehension. Ellen Keene, author of *Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader’s Workshop*, shares the following:

It has been over ten years since I began an immersion in professional literature and practical applications related to reading comprehension. Among many other effects, perhaps the most remarkable outcome of my exploration has been on my own reading. I read differently now than I did fifteen years ago. I have moved from a passive to an active stance. I am acutely aware of my own reading process, the questions and challenges I have for the authors I read, the awareness I have of moments of confusion and disorientation in the text, and the tools I use to confront that confusion...I know now that my reading is not some finite, predetermined ability, pace, or style that was programmed in Miss Gregg’s first-grade class. My thinking as

<sup>65</sup> Biancarosa, G. and C.E. Snow. *Reading Next—A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy: A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004. <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/ReadingNext/ReadingNext.pdf>, accessed 7/1/2010, p. 8.

<sup>66</sup> Oh good, did you just ask yourself, “Am I an independent reader?” or “What strategies *do* I use?” If you heard that inner “voice” asking those questions, signs point to you being an independent reader.

a reader can be manipulated. I can make myself delve deeper, reflect more, remember more, make more conscious decisions about how I read and what I understand.<sup>67</sup>

Indeed, one way to explore the strategies good readers use to comprehend a text is to reflect on how we ourselves make sense of a variety of texts.<sup>68</sup> To jump-start this process, please read the following passage. As much as possible, be *cognizant* about how you read the text:

**The Batsmen were merciless against the Bowlers. The Bowlers placed their men in slips and covers. But to no avail. The Batsmen hit one four after another along with an occasional six. Not once did their balls hit their stumps or get caught.**

What were some of the mental processes you engaged in while reading the text?

- Did you go back and re-read sentences?
- Did you notice yourself slowing down your reading pace?
- Did you ask questions, ranging from, “what the heck is this about?” to “what are ‘slips’?” and did you hear those questions being asked inside your head?
- Did you try to visualize how “balls” might “hit their stumps?”
- Did you infer this was about some sort of game, based on the apparent team names, and wonder if it was a game similar to baseball since there was talk of “balls” and “hitting” something?

If you were aware of some or all of these mental maneuverings, the comprehension strategies that most often are subconscious bubbled to the surface. These comprehension strategies are ones that good readers constantly draw upon to tackle texts, usually subconsciously, but sometimes quite consciously if the text presents challenges of structure, vocabulary, or background knowledge. The passage above was particularly challenging because of the novel vocabulary and your lack of background knowledge about the topic (we’ll tell you now, the passage was about the British game of cricket, although that information doesn’t help all that much because you probably still have little understanding of the vocabulary used). However, you did your best to make sense of it by relying on a variety of different comprehension strategies – comprehension strategies that are commonly used by all independent readers, and that we’ll define in the next section.

## II. Characteristics of Independent Readers

Perhaps what most separates independent readers from the rest of the pack is the belief that reading is an active process. In the book *Subjects Matter*, authors Harvey Daniels and Steven Zemelman assert, “readers actively build and construct meaning from a text. The meaning does not simply reside on the page, ready to be understood whole, nor is it a message simply “sent” by an author and “received” by reader.”<sup>69</sup> High school English teacher Cris Tovani and author of *I Read It, But I Don’t Get It* has giant purple letters above her chalkboard that say, “Reading is Thinking,” because she knows—and wants her

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<sup>67</sup> Keene Ellin Oliver and Susan Zimmermann. *Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader’s Workshop*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997, p. 5.

<sup>68</sup> The following section was modified from Daniels, Harvey and Steven Zemelman. *Subjects Matter: Every Teacher’s Guide to Content-Area Reading*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004, p. 21.

<sup>69</sup> Daniels, Harvey and Steven Zemelman. *Subjects Matter: Every Teacher’s Guide to Content-Area Reading*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004, p. 23.

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students to know—that “when readers construct meaning, they do so by way of deliberate, thoughtful cognition.”<sup>70</sup>

Researchers have come to understand the wide variety of strategies that readers use to construct meaning by asking adult volunteers to “think aloud” as they go through a text. Further studies have found that although comprehension involves more than 30 cognitive and metacognitive processes,<sup>71</sup> good readers use only a small handful of these consistently to help them understand what they read.<sup>72</sup> Let’s put names to the usually subconscious comprehension strategies we teased out of our brains with the passage about the cricket match, and that researchers generally agree are the most commonly used:

- **Self-Monitoring for Meaning.** Recognizing when you understand what is going on and when you are confused; recognizing when you have stopped paying close attention to the text and therefore need to re-read; slowing your reading pace when confused, speeding up when comfortable with the content and vocabulary.
- **Making Connections.** Connecting information or events in the text to your own personal experience (a *text-to-self* connection), to other texts (a *text-to-text* connection), or to your background knowledge about the topic (a *text-to-world* connection); these connections, when related to the central concept of the text, deepen comprehension.
- **Asking Questions.** Asking questions to clarify meaning, wonder what will happen, or speculate about the author’s intent, style, content or format.<sup>73</sup>
- **Inferring.** Using background knowledge to hypothesize, interpret, or draw conclusions from the events, information, or clues in the text.
- **Making Predictions.** Anticipating what will happen next in the story or what will be explained next in informational text, based on knowledge of genre, character type, or familiar sequences.
- **Visualizing.** Creating mental pictures of what is happening in the text.
- **Summarizing.** Restating the key points of a passage into a concise statement, which involves eliminating less important details.

Independent readers employ these strategies before, during, and after reading a text, and manifest other skills as well, as the following table details.<sup>74</sup> As you review the points, ask yourself which of the following you do automatically. The more “meta-cognitive” you can get about your own reading, the easier it will be for you to model these strategies to your students.

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<sup>70</sup> Tovani, Cris. *I Read It, But I Don’t Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers, 2000, p. 18.

<sup>71</sup> Block, Cathy Collins and Michael Pressley. *Comprehension Instruction: Research-Based Best Practices*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2002, p. 3.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid p. 13.

<sup>73</sup> Keene Ellin Oliver and Susan Zimmermann. *Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader’s Workshop*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997, p. 110.

<sup>74</sup> Riggs, Ernestine. *Helping Middle and High School Readers: Teaching and Learning Strategies Across the Curriculum*. (What We Know About Series.) Arlington, VA: Educational Research Service, 2001, p. 5.

	<b>Independent Readers...</b>
<b>Before Reading</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognize that we read for a variety of purposes, such as to get information or for enjoyment.</li> <li>• Preview the text before reading, looking over the table of contents, jacket summary, chapter headings, bolded vocabulary or concepts, and important terms in margins.</li> <li>• Make predictions by looking at clues in the illustrations, headers, or chapter titles.</li> <li>• Recognize genre conventions in text – the characteristics of a poem, story, novel, newspaper, or textbook – and then approach the reading appropriately.</li> </ul>
<b>During Reading</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Believe that reading requires active engagement on the part of the reader and that meaning does not just materialize from decoding the words on the page. Consequently, they apply a wide variety of comprehension strategies to make sense of a text: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Recognize through self-monitoring when the text is not making sense</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>○ Visualize details and events in a text</li> </ul> </li> <li>• “Hear” the text as they read the words, and conduct an internal dialogue about the text.</li> <li>• Adjust reading rate based on the purpose of reading and the level of text difficulty.</li> <li>• Read fluently and with appropriate expression.</li> <li>• Successfully apply word attack strategies and use context clues when encountering vocabulary with which they are unfamiliar</li> </ul>
<b>After Reading</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summarize and paraphrase information from text in their own words.</li> <li>• Answer questions based on the information they learned from reading the text.</li> <li>• Challenge the author, often with the ability to identify biases and distortion.</li> <li>• Express opinions based on text.</li> </ul>

Given that we, as proficient, independent readers, do most of these things without thinking about them, the danger exists that we might assume that our students already have the same abilities, and therefore merely *assign* reading, rather than *teach* reading. Let’s examine some of the hurdles we’ll have to overcome with our struggling readers.

### III. Characteristics of Struggling Readers

If you were to survey a group of struggling readers about what they do when they read, you’d get a range of responses, perhaps including statements such as, “I skip words I don’t know,” “I read the words even though I don’t know what they mean,” or “I read fast so I can get to the end of the chapter and answer the questions.” If asked what separated them from students who they thought were “good” readers, they might shrug and say, “they just get what the story is about – I don’t.” Remember the most fundamental difference between independent and struggling readers: their belief (or lack thereof) that “reading is thinking” and that true comprehension requires application of a range of cognitive processes.

Of course, struggling readers could be struggling with more than just the application of comprehension strategies. As explained in an earlier chapter, one key piece of reading is decoding, so struggling readers may have limited phonemic awareness (the ability to think about individual words as a sequence of spoken sounds or phonemes). Struggling readers may lack word attack skills and have low fluency, which then impacts

*My struggling readers believe that ‘reading’ involves moving the eyes and occasionally moving the mouth and nothing more. They haven’t realized (or they haven’t been taught) that reading involves an internal dialogue with multiple voices. One voice reads the words, either audibly or mentally, while other voices question, respond, and critique.*

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comprehension, as being “glued to the print” leaves little cognitive space to focus on meaning. The following table captures a struggling reader’s behavior before, during, and after reading a text.

Struggling Readers...	
<b>Before Reading</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Begin to read without thinking about the topic or without setting a purpose for reading.</li> <li>• Do not preview the text and activate prior knowledge by looking for key vocabulary or surveying the text structure (chapter titles, headings, charts, graphs).</li> <li>• Do not know about different genres and how one approaches reading differently based on the genre.</li> <li>• Lack interest and motivation to begin.</li> </ul>
<b>During Reading</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not realize that reading requires active engagement on the part of the reader, and that “good readers” struggle to make meaning of texts.</li> <li>• Do not know when comprehension is not occurring, or do know but don’t know how to apply comprehension strategies:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Do not visualize details or try to make connections between the text and prior experiences or knowledge</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>○ Assume that the meaning is restricted to what is literally written on the page and do not “read between the lines”</li> <li>○ Are not able to distinguish between important events/facts and details; may emphasize the more interesting ideas over important ones</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Read slowly, sometimes one word at a time, without paying attention to punctuation and without expression.</li> <li>• Read too quickly, disregarding punctuation, substituting or skipping unknown words without stopping to clarify pronunciation or meaning.</li> <li>• Read to finish (or get to the questions at the end of a chapter) rather than to understand.</li> <li>• Do not “hear” the text when reading silently.</li> </ul>
<b>After Reading</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not understand how the pieces of information fit together.</li> <li>• Read a passage only once and believe they are finished.</li> <li>• May focus on extraneous, peripheral information.</li> <li>• See reading as distasteful.</li> </ul>

Clearly, there could be several hurdles to overcome when working with struggling readers in your secondary language arts, science, or math classroom, but many are hurdles that can be overcome with direct instruction on the strategies of an independent reader. In the next section, we’ll explore teacher “think alouds,” a key strategy for moving struggling students to independence.

### IV. Moving Students from Struggling to Independent

How do you, as a secondary content area teacher, teach the comprehension strategies your struggling readers need to become independent readers? The key word is “explicitly.” Rather than just telling our students to summarize, draw inferences, make connections, or ask questions, those strategies must be explicitly explained, modeled, and practiced with a variety of texts. As Kylee Beers, author of *When Kids Can’t Read: What Teachers Can Do*, states,

We don’t help dependent readers when our instruction is limited to, “Don’t forget to predict,” or “It will help if you visualize,” or “Look for the causal relationships.” Instead, we’ve got to show these students how we use strategies to enhance our understanding of a text as we “think aloud” a text for them...education is not a Nike commercial: you can’t say, “Just do it.” Instead, we must show students how to do it.

How do you show that reading is a process that requires the reader to exert purposeful effort? You open your mind to your typically invisible thoughts, by sharing your inner thinking voice in a “think aloud.” Consider the following steps in a “think aloud” mini-lesson on reading comprehension strategies that any secondary content area teacher could deliver:<sup>75</sup>

**1. Decide what specific strategies you want to model and what text you will use to model that strategy.** Recall the list of reading comprehension strategies in section one of this chapter. Note that reading researchers disagree on the order in which they should be taught, although self-monitoring for meaning is certainly foundational, as is making connections and asking questions (since our struggling readers don’t realize that good readers often have questions about what they read). Choose the specific strategy you will model, given the weaknesses you have identified in students and the particular text you are currently using. Focus in on one, or at the most two, comprehension strategies, as opposed to trying to model several at once. Then, go through that text, being cognizant of how you apply that strategy to comprehend the text. Some people might argue that a “cold” reading of a text will allow a “think aloud” to be truly authentic. However, for your modeling to be truly purposeful and comprehensive, it is important to plan out what you will think out loud—even with sticky notes at various points on the text—ahead of time.

**2. Tell your students exactly what strategy you’ll be practicing while reading the passage.** Students should have a copy of the passage in front of them so they can follow along as well. Below is an example of how a secondary earth science teacher might introduce a “think aloud” that models the effective use of making connections in a passage from a science textbook:

While I read this section of the textbook on how lightning is formed, I’m going to practice making connections between what the author says about how lightning is formed and things I know about in my every day life. This is an example of a text-to-world connection. Those connections will help me understand the passage, because I’ll be relating something I don’t currently know a lot about to things I do know and understand. Good readers are always making connections to what they know when they read.

Watch how I stop at various points in the text to make connections between what I’m reading and what I’m thinking in my head as I read. Remember, reading is thinking! I’m going to articulate exactly what would have gone on just inside my head – but I’ll say it out loud so you can hear my thinking. Please follow along in the text as I read out loud and think out loud, and mark the points where I stop to make connections with a star. After this, you’ll be given an opportunity to read the text to yourself to make your own connections.

To help struggling readers truly see when you are reading from the text and when you are thinking about the text, some teachers strike a “thinking pose” by putting a finger to their temple, hold a “thought bubble” above their head, or put on a “thinking cap” when they are making their invisible thoughts visible to the class. Such strategies help students clearly see the internal dialogue that goes on in the heads of independent readers.

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<sup>75</sup> Following section modified from Beers, Kylene. *When Kids Can’t Read: What Teachers Can Do*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003, p. 42.

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**3. Read the passage to students, modeling the strategy or strategies to students.** We'll continue with the same earth science teacher as she models making connections while reading a passage from the earth science textbook about how lightning is formed. The italicized text is what the teacher says out loud to illustrate her thinking. She chooses to simply set the textbook down and look pensive when sharing her thoughts:

### How Lightning Is Formed

The first process in the generation of lightning is the **separation of positive and negative charges** within a cloud of air. *(Separation of positive and negative charges...that reminds me of how a battery has a positive end and a negative end.)* The mechanism by which this happens is still the subject of research, but one widely accepted theory is the polarization mechanism. This mechanism has two components: the first is that falling droplets of ice and rain become electrically polarized as they fall through the atmosphere's natural electric field, and the second is that colliding ice particles become charged by **electrostatic induction**. *(Electrostatic must be like when you have static cling or get a shock from someone. I think my brother was inducted into the honor society, meaning he was introduced and allowed into the group. It sounds like the atmosphere, which is charged I guess, introduces a charge to the ice and rain. Huh.)* Once charged, by whatever mechanism, the positively charged crystals tend to **rise to the top** causing the cloud top to build up a positive charge, and the negatively charged crystals and hailstones **drop to the middle and bottom layers of the cloud** (Yup, it sounds like the charges are separated just like they are in a battery), building up a negative charge. Cumulonimbus *(Cum-u-lo...let me try that again...Cum-u-lo-nim-bus...I don't know what type of cloud that is, but I don't think it is really important for me to understand how lightning forms)* clouds that do not produce enough ice crystals usually fail to produce enough charge separation to cause lightning.

The second process is the buildup of positive charges on the ground beneath the clouds. The earth is normally negatively charged with respect to the atmosphere. But as the **thunderstorm** passes over the ground *(Huh. That is the first time a thunderstorm has been mentioned. But, I guess usually when I see lightning I hear thunder before it...)*, the negative charges at the bottom of the cumulonimbus cloud cause the positive charges on the ground to gather along the surface for several miles around the storm and become concentrated in vertical objects including trees and tall buildings. **If you feel your hair stand up on end** in a lightning storm, beware. *(I've felt that, but not in a storm! I remember when my uncle rubbed a balloon on my head at my birthday party and then pulled it away a little bit – I could feel my hair stand on end!)* The negative charges from the cloud are pulling the positive charges inside your body to the top of your head and you could be in danger of being struck.

The third process is the generation of the lightning. When sufficient negatives and positives gather in this way, an **electrical discharge** occurs within the clouds or between the clouds and the ground, **producing the bolt** *(So the bolt of lightning is produced when enough negative and positive charges build up. Maybe just like if you scuff your feet across a rug*

*We used "think alouds" during all reading activities. We especially used "think alouds" when reading the science textbook, as making connections and summarizing information while stumbling over difficult words was an everyday challenge. When I ignored that challenge in the beginning of my first year, my students floundered and had to find ways around the text. When I challenged them daily in my second semester, my students learned to overcome the challenge.*

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*enough, you build up the charge in your body, and then you'll get a shock – kind of like a mini lightning-bolt – when you touch something...].<sup>76</sup>*

**4. Debrief the “think aloud.”** After your “think aloud,” debrief the process and the benefits of using that strategy with your students.

Ok class, what was I doing when I stopped and shared my thinking at various points in the text? That's right, I was connecting something I read in the text – something I didn't understand fully – to something I knew more about in my life. That helped me understand what I was reading better. Can someone look back in the text and tell me a time when I stopped to make a connection, and explain the connection that I made? Right. Can someone else make a connection to something in your life at that same point in the text? Great. Now, how did that help you comprehend the information in that sentence? Oh, so you got a visual picture of a battery next to a cloud? Interesting. So making that connection also caused you to visualize what was being explained in the text about the cloud. That is great – visualizing is another strategy that good readers use...

**5. Give your students multiple chances to practice the strategy you've demonstrated with other real reading situations.** As with the mastery of any skill, your students need to practice the skill multiple times with others and independently. In our example earth science class, they might practice making their own connections first with this same passage the teacher used, sharing with the class afterwards or “putting on their thinking caps” with a partner. Then, they might practice, independently or with a partner, with the next few paragraphs, this time without any connections made by the teacher to help shape their thinking. (In the next chapter, you'll learn specific methods that will prompt students to apply various comprehension strategies before, during, and after reading.) Because students' use of comprehension strategies needs to be constantly reinforced, especially when different types of texts are used, it would be important to provide future opportunities to focus on the skill of making connections with other texts.

### **Additional Considerations for Teaching Comprehension Strategies**

A think aloud ensures that the comprehension process used by proficient readers is not a mystery to our struggling readers. However, to ensure we are not producing a shallow understanding or use of a comprehension strategy, and therefore producing only shallow improvements in comprehension, consider a more nuanced view of each strategy and how to teach it:

- **Self-Monitoring for Meaning.** One of our first tasks is to guide students to monitor their own comprehension, so each student can “know when you know, and know when you don't know.” Before students can fix a comprehension problem, they have to know it's there. Therefore, teaching students to monitor for meaning should be a major focus of your reading instruction, particularly at the beginning of the school year. 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 for good readers. Of course, you will model this for your students in a

*One entire wall of my classroom is dedicated to reading strategies. At the top a banner says, “I read it but I don't get it! What should I do?” I had my students make a poster for each reading strategy we've talked about (asking questions, visualizing, etc.). The kids love it and I see them look over at the posters all the time while they're reading. Since the posters take up an entire large wall, this display also visually indicates the importance of thinking while reading.*

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<sup>76</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lightning>, accessed 7/1/2010.

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“think aloud” by saying, “You know, I don’t think I understood that last bit. It didn’t really make sense to me. I think I need to re-read that confusing part.” You will stop a student reading out loud to the class and 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.”

- **Making Connections.** Through modeling, you will need to show students that making connections to your personal experiences, to a previously read book, and to background knowledge can help you understand what you are reading. As our teacher above stated repeatedly, “I was connecting something I read in the text – something I didn’t understand fully – to something I knew more about in my life. That helped me understand what I was reading better.” Matt Kelley (Mississippi Delta ’02) teaches eleventh grade English and reports that his “students enjoy making connections because this strategy allows them to see how a text relates to their life and helps them ‘get into’ a story.” Because many students tend to latch on to an unimportant detail without considering whether the connection aids their comprehension, you will need to challenge students to make meaningful connections that relate to the central concept of the passage. You might explain and model that some connections are small (they relate to a little detail that isn’t that important to the story), while other connections are big (they relate to the big idea of the whole story). Then, you could ask students to determine whether sample connections are small and less meaningful, or big and more meaningful.
- **Asking Questions.** Many of our struggling readers assume that good readers are never confused about the meaning of a book, and they are shocked to learn that good readers always have questions about their reading. We must break down this misconception through modeling. Once you have encouraged students to ask questions, you will probably find that they have a million! Consequently, you will need to teach students how to identify the questions that are most central to an understanding of the reading. You might help students distinguish between thick questions (those that are about key points and concepts) and thin questions (those that seek clarification of minor points).<sup>77</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>78</sup> Finally, you might point out to students that the most interesting and important questions are often those that we can’t answer simply by looking back in the text but that require further research.
- **Inferring.** As Harvey and Goudvis tell us in *Strategies That Work*, “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>79</sup> When students know how to use their background knowledge and textual clues, they can extrapolate 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. However, multiple inferences are necessary even when reading a simple paragraph like the one on the following page:

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<sup>77</sup> Harvey, Stephanie and Anne Goudvis. *Strategies that Work: Teaching Comprehension to Enhance Understanding*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers, 2000, p. 89.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid p. 90.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid p. 105.

He put down \$10.00 at the window. The woman behind the window gave him \$4.00. The person next to him gave him \$3.00, but he gave it back to her. So, when they went inside, she bought him a large bag of popcorn.<sup>80</sup>

You probably *inferred* from this passage that a man and a woman are going to the movies. Since the woman behind the window gave the man \$4.00 change for his \$10.00, the tickets must have cost \$6.00 total or \$3.00 each. (You probably wondered where one can still see a movie for \$3.00.) The man's date wanted to pay for her own ticket, but he refused her offer. Instead, she bought the popcorn. This process required you to make several different inferences: both ones based on background knowledge (knowing how it works at the "window" of a movie, knowing that people usually buy popcorn at a movie) and ones based on the text (determining who the pronouns referred to, why the woman bought the popcorn). You'll need to model the process of making inferences for your students using a simple text like the one above, explaining the different types of inferences that can be made, and how many must be made to understand a text.

- **Making Predictions.** Many readers make predictions naturally. Struggling readers, however, "don't predict what the selection might be about...they simply open a book, look at the words, and begin turning pages."<sup>81</sup> You may need to model the process of making predictions for your students and give them opportunities to practice in a supported manner (for example, by using the Probable Passage strategy shared in the next chapter). You should also push your students to make sophisticated predictions and think critically about the text by asking them to explain the thinking behind their prediction.
- **Visualizing.** Make students aware that illustrators, textbook artists, and photographers use this particular comprehension strategy when they receive the author's text and decide which pictures should accompany it. 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 this particular character," or "Make pictures in your mind about what we're learning about the water cycle." Additionally, asking students to sketch their mental images will help you assess their comprehension.
- **Summarizing.** In order to summarize effectively, students must be able to determine what's important in a text, to comprehend the essence of a passage, and to remember and retell what they have read in a logical, coherent manner. You may need to start small in this process, showing students how to summarize an individual paragraph before moving to an entire story or article.

*When I found out that I would be teaching 7<sup>th</sup> Grade English and History, I was most excited by the idea of pushing my students to think critically and analytically about the ethical/social questions brought up throughout history. What I wasn't expecting was that, in order to do this, we would have to first conquer a text using a myriad of comprehension strategies. Only after my students struggled through figuring out what the text was actually saying could we move on to the kind of discussions that pushed their thinking beyond the text's borders.*

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**Director of Service Learning,**  
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After reading through the process of a "think aloud" and considering the other strategies to teach your students, you may be thinking, "But I'm a social studies teacher and I have so much history content to teach my students! How am I going to also teach these strategies?" The answer is with strategic

<sup>80</sup> Beers, Kylene. *When Kids Can't Read: What Teachers Can Do*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003, p. 63.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid p. 87.

## Helping All Students Become Independent Readers

planning, and recognition that if you don't teach these strategies, you will not be able to teach as much content to your students. Instead, you will have to spend more time making sense of the text *for* students, like Mr. Brunell in our opening vignette. Consider the assertion made by the authors of *Subjects Matter*:

Understanding what we do now, we will teach reading, not just assign it, though that doesn't mean we are turning into reading teachers. We are specialists – science, math, history, art, music, foreign language people – to the bone. The difference is, we'll break the work up into steps for the kids, and provide help along the way. We'll be using methods, tools, activities, and procedures that help our students understand and remember our content better.<sup>82</sup>

English teachers should also avoid falling into the trap of making sense of texts for students. Consider the reflection of Felicia Cuesta (Los Angeles '02), a former 7<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher:

When I first envisioned my role as a secondary English teacher, I thought that it would involve reading novels together and engaging in deep discussions about their literary merits. Once I entered the classroom, however, this changed, as I realized that my students read significantly below grade level. My students could decode decently, but they did not comprehend what they were reading. At first, my lessons consisted of the class reading the text together in a read-aloud and with me explaining everything that had just happened in the story. By the end of my first semester, we had gone through an entire novel and several short stories and poems, but I was not thoroughly teaching or assessing the reading standards. Moreover, I knew that I was the one doing all the work; my students didn't have to comprehend the text because I ended up explaining it.

This changed during my off-track time when I went to a workshop that introduced the concept of "reading instructional time." The idea was that every day, we would spend time teaching my students how to read—not just how to sound out words, but how to really read for understanding. This is the essence of teaching Reading Comprehension, the behemoth English/Language Arts standard that is the cornerstone of any English class. The program explained that there are 7 "habits" of highly effective readers and by explicitly teaching these habits, you would teach students how to be "good" readers. I realized these habits are things that I, as a voracious reader, do all the time, but subconsciously. My epiphany was that if I train my students how to perform these habits consciously, it would become subconscious, thus boosting their reading comprehension in any material that they chose to read.

The next step was to explicitly teach each "habit," or comprehension skill in mini-lessons and reinforce them through modeling and student practice. I soon discovered a reading comprehension diagnostic that actually assessed each reading habit. After administering this diagnostic, I created on-going quizzes to assess my students on each reading skill and track their progress.

In summary, I realized that by just reading novels as a class and then explaining to my students what had happened, I was not giving them anything lasting, relevant or applicable. When I made the shift to teaching explicit skills, I was giving my students

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<sup>82</sup> Daniels, Harvey and Steven Zemelman. *Subjects Matter: Every Teacher's Guide to Content-Area Reading*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004, p. 32.

skills that they could apply to any text in any subject, from science to poetry, from newspapers to novels, from word problems to history textbooks. I could truly improve my students' reading comprehension in English, and I would improve their performance in every other subject as well, with any other type of text that they were required to read.

We close with a note of encouragement: if you're feeling concerned about your own ability to teach comprehension strategies to your students, remember that you yourself are an independent reader. The challenge for you as a teacher will be to think explicitly about the varied reading strategies you use, and then to teach those strategies to your students so that they can apply them to a variety of texts as well. You also bring another strength to this type of instruction. Given your content area knowledge, you are more adept than most people at making sense of the various texts in your content area. A math teacher can evaluate what is important in a math word problem, and a social studies teacher can make connections between primary source documents better than the average Joe. Don't underestimate your own abilities to demystify the particular strategies required to make sense of your course's texts. The key is to be cognizant of your own reading strategies, and then to teach those strategies to your students in mini-lessons throughout the year.

## **Conclusion**

- Part of teaching your students to be independent readers will involve becoming more and more cognizant of your own reading strategies. As reading the "simple" cricket passage illustrated, you yourself use a variety of thinking strategies to make sense of a text. Hopefully that process has made you even more aware of the typically subconscious strategies you use. As teachers and authors who think about student reading comprehension have found, there is a positive feedback loop between reflecting on one's own reading strategies and teaching those strategies to others.
- The fundamental difference between independent and struggling readers is the degree to which those readers believe that "reading is thinking." Struggling readers need to be shown, taught, and encouraged to practice the thinking strategies that good readers employ, such as self-monitoring, asking questions, visualizing, making connections, making predictions, inferring, and summarizing.
- Purposeful "think alouds" are one highly effective strategy for making one's typically invisible comprehension strategies visible to struggling readers.