Teaching comprehension strategies

Curriculum K-12

NSW GOVERNMENT | Education & Training

These professional learning materials were originally developed as part of the *Focus on Reading 3–6* program.

Readings

Comprehension

NSW Department of Education and Training

Comprehension involves responding to, interpreting, analysing and evaluating texts.
(NSW Department of Education and Training Literacy Continuum)

When learners comprehend, they interpret, integrate, critique, infer, analyse, connect and evaluate ideas in texts. They negotiate multiple meanings not only in their heads but in the minds of others. When comprehending, learners strive to process text beyond word-level to get to the big picture. When comprehension is successful, learners are left with a sense of satisfaction from having understood the meaning of a text.

Comprehension takes the learner to a new level of active understanding and insight. It enhances language and vocabulary knowledge. Good learners use a variety of comprehension strategies simultaneously and, according to Pressley (2002), they know how to deliberately apply specific strategies to aid their comprehension, particularly with regard to challenging texts/information.

> [A] reader can read a variety of materials with ease and interest, can read for varying purposes, and can read with comprehension even when the material is neither easy to understand nor intrinsically interesting … Proficient readers … are capable of acquiring new knowledge and understanding new concepts, are capable of applying textual information appropriately and are capable of being engaged in the reading process and reflecting on what is being read. (p. xiii, RAND Report, commissioned by the US Department of Education)

The National Reading Panel (2000) emphasised the fact that comprehension is an active process between the reader and a text, a process that is both 'intentional and thoughtful'.

There are many ways that students demonstrate their understandings of texts. They locate and recall information, draw on the knowledge of text structures and text organisers, write short reflective responses, complete multiple choice questions, think deeply and express ideas verbally, complete descriptions, recognise causal relationships, make logical connections, interpret graphics and images and identify multiple points of view and specific details.

It has been found that less able comprehenders usually focus more on word accuracy rather than comprehension monitoring and generally have weak metacognition skills (Cain and Oakhill, 1999; Nation et al., 2005). Students with poor comprehension generally are poor at making inferences and integrating text information, according to Nation et al., (2005). They tend to read superficially, are less likely to participate in constructive processes and are unsure of when to apply their prior knowledge during reading (Cain and Oakhill, 1999). Research has shown that there are sources of comprehension problems that are independent of decoding (Williams, 2005). Researchers have also identified students who cannot comprehend text effectively in spite of successful decoding (Caccamise & Snyder, 2005; Duke, Pressley & Hilden, 2004).

Learners who struggle with comprehension possess inefficient strategies and use them inflexibly. They are usually unaware of what good comprehenders do and need to be shown how and when to apply a small repertoire of comprehension strategies. Providing students with explicit instruction in comprehension strategies can be an effective way to help them overcome difficulties in understanding texts (Graham & Bellert, 2004). The more explicit the comprehension strategy and self-regulatory instruction, the higher the likelihood that the learner will make significant gains in comprehension (Manset-Williamson & Nelson, 2005). As learners become more competent and confident of their comprehension, the less support they require from the teacher (Duke & Pearson, 2002).

Readings

Comprehension bibliography

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RAND Reading Study Group (2002) *Reading for understanding toward and R & D program in reading comprehension*, RAND, Arlington, VA.

Williams, J. P., Patterson, E., Salas, R., Prater, S. & Turner, M. (2002) 'More than just reading: The human factor in reaching resistant reades', *Reading teacher*, 58, pp. 346–357.

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Teaching comprehension strategies

As articulated in the previous reading on p. 2, teaching students to be good comprehenders involves providing them with explicit instruction in comprehension strategies.

The following pages provide:

- definitions of comprehension strategies and teaching ideas
- descriptions and examples of the repertoire of the *Super Six* comprehension strategies
- a process for explicit instruction of comprehension strategies
- some teaching ideas that will support the teaching of comprehension strategies.

On pp. 8–10, the teaching ideas refer to two key recommended texts that have been identified as providing rich ideas to support the explicit teaching of comprehension strategies:

- *Guided Comprehension in Grades 3–8*, Maureen McLaughlin & Mary Beth Allen, 2009, International Reading Association
- *Revisit, Reflect, Retell,* Linda Hoyt, 2009, Heinemann.

They can be purchased from:
<http://www.amazon.com/>

Clarifying terms

Comprehension strategies	Comprehension strategies are the cognitive and metacognitive strategies readers use to accomplish the goal of comprehension. Comprehension strategies are interrelated and will rarely be used in isolation. This course focuses on the 'Super Six' cognitive and metacognitive comprehension strategies.
Teaching ideas	Teaching ideas are the activities and practices that teachers use with students to help them learn how to use comprehension strategies. For example, *Picture This, Storyboard.*

What is the difference between cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies?

Cognitive strategies are mental processes involved in achieving something. For example, making a cake.

Metacognitive strategies are the mental processes that help us think about and check how we are going in completing the task. For example, 'Is there something that I have left out?'

Cognitive and metacognitive strategies may overlap depending on the purpose/goal. For example, as the cognitive strategies involved in making a cake proceed (following the steps in order), the metacognitive strategies assess and monitor the progress (to check that a step has not been missed).

How does this relate to comprehension?

Cognitive strategies assist in understanding what is being read. For example, predicting

Metacognition is particularly relevant to comprehension. Metacognitive strategies allow individuals to monitor and assess their ongoing performance in understanding what is being read. For example, as a text is being read, the reader might think: *I don't understand this. I might need to re-read this part.*

'Super Six' comprehension strategies

Making connections

Description

Learners make personal connections from the text with:

- something in their own life (text to self)
- another text (text to text)
- something occurring in the world (text to world).

Example questions/statements

This story reminds me of a holiday to my grandfather's farm.

This character has the same problem that I read/saw/heard in another text.

I saw a program on television that presented things described in this text.

Does this remind me/you of something?

Has something like this ever happened to me/you?

Example teaching idea

Book and me: Students create two columns with headings *Book/Me*. Prior to and during reading students add details about the connections between the book and their lives.

Predicting

Description

Learners use information from graphics, text and experiences to anticipate what will be read/viewed/heard and to actively adjust comprehension while reading/viewing/listening.

Example questions/statements

What do I/you think will happen next?

What words/images do I/you expect to see or hear in this text?

What might happen next? Why do I/you think that? What helped me/you make that prediction?

Were my/your predictions accurate? How did I/you confirm my/your predictions?

Have I/you read/seen/heard about this topic anywhere else?

Example teaching idea

Before and after chart: Students list predictions before and during reading. As they read students either confirm or reject their predictions.

Questioning

Description

Learners pose and answer questions that clarify meaning and promote deeper understanding of the text. Questions can be generated by the learner, a peer or the teacher.

Example questions/statements

What in the text helped me/you know that?

How is this text making me/you feel? Why is that?

When you read/viewed/ listened to that text did it remind me/you of anything I/you know about? Why did it remind me/you of that?

What did the composer of the text mean by …?

Whose point of view is this? What points of view are missing?

Example teaching idea

Wonderings: Using post-it notes, students list all the questions they have about the text. As they read students continue to write questions. When an answer is found for the wondering students remove the post-it note.

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Monitoring

Description

Learners stop and think about the text and know what to do when meaning is disrupted.

Example questions/statements

Is this making sense?
What have I/you learned?
Should I/you slow down? Speed up?
Do I need to re-read/view/listen?
What can help me/you fill in the missing information?
What does this word mean?
What can I use to help me understand what I'm/you're reading/viewing/hearing?

Example teaching idea

Coding: As they read students code the text with post-it notes
✔   I understand
?   I don't understand
!   I fixed it up myself

Visualising

Description

Learners create a mental image from a text read/viewed/heard. Visualising brings the text to life, engages the imagination and uses all of the senses.

Example questions/statements

What are the pictures I/you have in my/your head as I/you read/view/listen to this text?
Can I/you describe the picture or image you made while you read/heard that part?
How did the pictures in my/your head help me/you to understand the text?

Example teaching idea

Sketch to stretch: As a passage/story is read students sketch their visualisation. In groups they share their sketches and discuss reasons for their interpretation.

Summarising

Description

Learners identify and accumulate the most important ideas and restate them in their own words.

Example questions/statements

What things will help me/you summarise this text – list, mind map, note-taking, annotations, etc?
What are the main ideas and significant details from the reading/viewing/listening?
If you were to tell another person about the text read/viewed/heard in a few sentences, what would you tell them?
What is the main theme? How is it connected to the world beyond the text?
In what significant ways does this text relate to/elaborate on the topic that you have been investigating?
Can you create a metaphor for the text that you have read?

Example teaching idea

Key words: Students highlight words they believe are key to understanding the passage. These words are written on post-it notes and placed on the page. After reading the students close the book and arrange the key words in an order that supports a cohesive summary.

Explicit instruction of comprehension strategies

NB: Regardless of the strategy being taught, the process of explicit instruction remains the same.

Step 1: Select a text

Texts can range from easy to challenging. The criteria for text selection should focus on text usefulness for teaching a particular strategy or set of strategies, student interests and connections to literacy themes. If the text is challenging use 'read-aloud' when modelling.

Step 2: Explain the strategy

Focus on the two questions:

What is it?

Why is it helpful/necessary for comprehension?

Provide examples to assist this explanation and wherever possible make connections to students' background knowledge and prior learning.

Step 3: Model the strategy

Read a section of the text aloud and use a Think Aloud and a visual (symbol, chart, etc) to share ideas with students. NB: Think Aloud involves orally explaining precisely what is triggering thoughts and how it is affecting understanding. Explain thinking so that students have a clear idea of the cognitively active process readers experience. If a strategy requires a written or sketched response, model that during this step.

Step 4: Guided support

Read the next section of the text aloud and ask students to work with a partner to apply the new strategy. Discuss the response from paired students and read aloud another section of the text.

Step 5: Independent practice

Monitor as students work independently within the whole group. Either continue reading sections of the text with reduced teacher support or invite students to read independent texts on their own. Regardless, students independently use the strategy. Differentiate instruction by providing scaffolding for those students who need more support (through further modelling or guided support), and by releasing the task to those students who are ready to use it. The goal is to ensure that students know the strategy and the process for using it. Ultimately students develop a range of strategies that they can use as needed when they are reading on their own.

Step 6: Reflect

Ask students to reflect on how using the strategy helped them to understand the text. Invite them to share their reflections in small groups or with the whole class. Discuss how they can use the strategy when they are reading on their own.

Teaching ideas to support comprehension strategies

Comprehension strategy	Teaching ideas	Description	*Reference*
Making connections	Coding Strategy	As students read, they stop at each sentence or paragraph and indicate their reactions to their reading by using symbol codes to represent (I already knew this, new information, wow, I don't understand). After coding, students find a partner to share and compare codes and justify their codes.	*Revisit, Reflect, Retell* (pp. 176–177)
	Memorable Moments	Before reading a story, students anticipate a memorable moment. When they finish the story, they reflect on the most memorable moment and note another moment. Students take down a quote from the story.	*Revisit, Reflect, Retell* (p. 52)
	Connection stems	After reading a section of text aloud, show students a sentence stem, e.g. *That reminds me of …* and think aloud about the process you use for completing it. For support use the text-self, text-text, or text-world connection.	*Guided Comprehension in grades 3–8* (p. 202)
	Double-Entry Journal	Distribute copies of the journal. Students read or listen to a text. Ask students to select a key event, idea, word, quote or concept from the text to note down in the left hand side of the journal. Ask students to write their response or connection to the item in the left column.	*Guided Comprehension in grades 3–8* (p. 203)
Questioning	Stimulating Discussion Through Questions	Personal questions readers generate about a text stimulate connections, represent inferences, activate prior knowledge, and help to clarify understanding. Guide students in generating questions and assist them in generation questions and responses that are aesthetic, efferent, and critical/analytical.	*Revisit, Reflect, Retell* (pp. 46–47)
	Questioning	Preview a text. Read titles, subheadings, and the table of contents. Look at images. Read the first paragraph. Create an "I wonder" question. Read the text to answer your question. Repeat again and draw to show the most important ideas you learned.	*Revisit, Reflect, Retell* (pp. 182–183)
	Magic Jigsaw: A Questioning Strategy	Create a magic jigsaw with each piece containing a question. Question themes could include a post-reading summary: to show case questions, before reading: to profile questions that guide research, during reading: to collect questions that remain unanswered and need further research.	*Revisit, Reflect, Retell* (pp. 188–189)
	I Wonder	Guide students to wonder about the world, their lives, story events, and ideas presented in texts. Encourage students to wonder throughout the reading of a text. Use students' 'I wonder' statements to provide structure for further reading.	*Guided Comprehension in grades 3–8* (pp. 197)

Comprehension strategy	Teaching ideas	Description	Reference
Summarising	V.I.P.	Cut up sticky notes into strips. As student read, they can tear off a strip to mark points in the text that are V.I.P. (Very Important Points) for them. As a posting activity, students can compare points and tell why they chose to mark each one.	*Revisit, Reflect, Retell* (pp. 44–45)
	Partner Retelling	After reading a story to students, divide the class in half so there is a storyteller group and a listening group. The storytellers work in teams to reread the selection and remind each other of the focus points for retell. The listeners also reread and reflect on what the most important parts of the story were. Each storyteller pairs up with a listener to retell the story.	*Revisit, Reflect, Retell* (pp. 84–85)
	Team Retelling	Teams of 3 or 4 students reflect and talk about pertinent aspects of the story structure. Teams take turns retelling their stories with emphasis on the targeted elements of the story design. Use visual cards to support teams.	*Revisit, Reflect, Retell* (pp. 88–89)
	Key Word Strategy	Students select words they believe are important to understanding the text. Selected words are written on sticky notes and placed on the page from the text. After reading, arrange the keywords to support a cohesive summary. Student then retells or writes to summarise.	*Revisit, Reflect, Retell* (pp. 130–133)
	Pass Around Retells	Students work in teams of three or four. Each student is given a piece of paper. At a signal, everyone begins writing a retell of the story on their own paper. When a timer rings, each writer passes their paper to the right. Students need to read what has been written and continue the story from that point. Continue until paper reaches back to original writer.	*Revisit, Reflect, Retell* (p. 141)
	Weave a Web of Understanding	After reflection on a factual text, gather students in a circle. The first students hold a ball of wool and shares one thing that is remembered about the text. The first student hangs on to the string and the ball is passed across the circle not around. Repeat this process.	*Revisit, Reflect, Retell* (p. 178)
	I remember	Students are reminded to remember interesting information during a read-aloud. During the reading stop and pause and students share what they remembered from the text.	*Revisit, Reflect, Retell* (p. 22)

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Comprehension strategy	Teaching ideas	Description	Reference
Predicting	Partner Read and Think	Use the Partner Read and Think guide during each segment of text that is read. The steps involve placing a stop sign in the text, predicting words they think are likely to appear, reading the section, identifying words that are interesting or unknown followed by summarising the learning.	*Revisit, Reflect, Retell* (pp. 16–17)
	Word Predictions	After modelling this strategy students work as partners or individuals to engage in word predictions. Before reading the text, preview the text (look at pictures/illustrations) and list all words you think you will encounter and explain why. During reading, place a tally mark each time a word from your list appears. After reading, discuss why some of the words did not appear in text.	*Revisit, Reflect, Retell* (pp. 172–173)
	Predict-o-Gram	Select vocabulary from text to stimulate predictions. Working with partners students decide which story element the word tells about and writes each word on the Predict-o-Gram. Introduce the story and invite students to read it.	*Guided Comprehension in grades 3–8* (pp. 189–190)
Visualising	Sketch to Stretch	Read aloud a factual text, pausing often to allow students time to create simple line drawings with labels to capture their learning up to that point. As they sketch, think out aloud about key ideas and how these drawings can help them remember. After sketching, students share and explain their drawings in small groups.	*Revisit, Reflect, Retell* (p. 148)
	Gallery Images	In small groups, students read a section of a factual text and create mental images as they read. Students create and label images on paper to represent the content. Share images with the class.	*Guided Comprehension in grades 3–8* (pp. 205–206)
	Visual Organisers	Guide students on how to read a piece of text and noting key concepts and ideas on a visual organiser. Students can work with partners to practice using the visual organiser. Students share ideas with the class.	*Guided Comprehension in grades 3–8* (pp. 206–207)
Monitoring	Read, Cover, Remember, Retell	Students read a small amount of a factual texts and the cover the print with their hand. While the text is covered, students reflect on What they had learnt? What was important? What key words and ideas to remember? If unsure, they can recheck the content.	*Revisit, Reflect, Retell* (pp. 174–175)
	Bookmark Technique	During reading, students will make decisions and record specific information on each bookmark including the page and paragraph where the information is located. Use completed bookmarks to promote discussion about the text. Bookmarks could include a sketch on the most interesting part, a chart, a unknown word etc.	*Guided Comprehension in grades 3–8* (pp. 218–219)
	Patterned Partner Reading	Students work in pairs and select a text to read. During reading students choose a pattern to use as they engage in reading. Read-Pause-Ask Questions, Predict-Read-Discuss, or Read-Pause-Retell.	*Guided Comprehension in grades 3–8* (pp. 220–221)