

# Reading Comprehension: Helping Handout for School

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## INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension, often called the ultimate goal of reading, is a dynamic and complex process in which the reader simultaneously extracts information and constructs meaning from a text (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). Although language comprehension and reading comprehension are related, the term *comprehension* in this handout is used to refer only to reading comprehension.

Comprehension is an interaction among three factors: the reader, the text, and the reading activity. First, students' cognitive abilities, reading skill, motivation, and knowledge may influence their ability to understand text. For example, readers who cannot read text fluently will comprehend less (see *Reading Fluency Skills: Helping Handout for School*). Second, written passages may be less or more difficult to comprehend depending on their meaning, purpose, structure, illustrations, and demands on readers' language and knowledge. Third, reading comprehension depends on readers' purpose for reading. Purposes for reading might include increasing knowledge; applying content, such as gathering information to form an argument; or being entertained (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002).

Comprehension is an important target of instruction for teachers at all grade levels and across many content areas. Although instruction in primary grades requires significant instructional time and focus on word recognition skills, instruction for beginning readers should also promote comprehension. For older readers, comprehension instruction is necessary to learn from content area texts.

## WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS

Assessment data can be used to guide choices about interventions and supports for struggling readers. Standardized comprehension assessments may be useful for determining how students perform compared to their peers, which can help to identify a student who needs intervention to improve reading comprehension. However, standardized comprehension assessments do not yield diagnostic guidance. Therefore, when considering interventions for a student who struggles with comprehension, rather than using standardized comprehension assessments, it is important to first consider the various factors that influence reading comprehension, including student characteristics as well as characteristics of instruction and curriculum.

### Individual Student Characteristics

Individual student characteristics that influence comprehension include a student's word reading accuracy, fluency, and vocabulary knowledge. Any combination of these factors could affect a student's comprehension of specific texts or general comprehension abilities. A student with weak comprehension and weak word-reading accuracy will benefit from a word-reading intervention. A student with weak comprehension but strong word-reading accuracy and fluency is the best candidate for a comprehension intervention.

### Characteristics of Instruction and Curriculum

The amount, type, and level of a student's access to reading materials influence the student's comprehension. Texts should include a variety of

levels, ranging from easier to more challenging. Access to authentic texts that include rich vocabulary and vary in length and genre can improve a student's comprehension ability. Additionally, a student's interests should be considered. Text topics should engage and motivate the student to read and learn interesting facts and ideas from the text.

Giving students opportunities to read and then write about what they have read improves their comprehension. In classes in which students are reading to learn content, as they write about what they have read, they are developing vocabulary and analyzing and discussing to interpret the text. Continuing to provide students with opportunities to read and write can help them maintain the comprehension skills they have achieved. Because the needle measuring general comprehension moves slowly, comprehension is best taught by focusing on daily reading of a specific text.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to presenting their general classroom practices, teachers should target five specific areas for enhancing students' comprehension: text selection, vocabulary instruction, comprehension instruction, extended discussion, and motivation strategies (Duke & Carlisle, 2011). The recommendations below cover classroom teaching and those five areas.

### General Classroom Practices

The first set of recommendations describes K–12 classroom practices that support the development of reading comprehension (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). These practices are appropriate for nonfiction or fiction texts prevalent in language arts classes as well as content area classes, including science and social studies.

1. **Provide opportunities for reading multiple genres.** Developing students' comprehension requires giving them extensive practice with *literary texts* (e.g., fiction, literary nonfiction, and poetry) and *informational texts* (e.g., expository, argumentative, and procedural texts), including multimedia texts.
2. **Provide high-volume access to words in context.** Repeated exposure to new academic and content-specific words in reading, writing, and discussion builds vocabulary incrementally.

3. **Teach academic vocabulary directly.** Academic vocabulary includes essential vocabulary for engaging students in classroom tasks that build comprehension across all content areas. Academic vocabulary includes words such as *explain*, *analyze*, *compare*, and *critique*.
4. **Use graphic organizers to make text structure visible.** Story maps, outlines, concept maps, or Venn diagrams help the student anticipate content before reading, organize ideas during reading, and discuss or write about the content after reading.
5. **Foster peer collaboration.** Students can read and discuss texts in partners or groups, including pairs or groups formed with a range of comprehension proficiency.
6. **Allow students to lead structured, small-group discussions.** In discussions of their reading, students could take turns leading the discussion, making predictions, asking questions, and summarizing.
7. **Provide reading and text-based writing opportunities in all content areas.** Giving students opportunities to write about fiction or nonfiction texts they are reading allows them to revisit and review the ideas and enhances their comprehension of the content.

### Text Selection

The characteristics of a text influence the extent to which the text interests and motivates students and makes it more accessible during an intervention. The text qualities recommended here can influence students' comprehension and are important considerations for selecting interventions.

8. **Choose interesting, high-quality texts.** Texts with rich content, clear organization, and variety in vocabulary and sentence structure give students opportunities to build essential comprehension skills and positive dispositions toward reading.
9. **Consider text difficulty.** Selected texts should be of appropriate difficulty—including a range of less and more challenging texts—based on the student's reading ability and the instructional activity. Having text with familiar content might make a more difficult text accessible to a student.
10. **Increase text difficulty over time.** Students' comprehension can be developed through guided and independent reading using progressively more difficult texts. More difficult texts may include more unfamiliar vocabulary, more

challenging concepts or themes, or less cohesion, requiring readers to infer how ideas are connected.

11. **Choose texts that require processing.** When teaching students to use a comprehension strategy, having them read a text that is too difficult to understand easily can challenge them to use the strategy. Students learn that strategies are essential when they successfully use a strategy to understand a difficult text. Reading aloud to younger students, who cannot read and comprehend on their own, provides an opportunity to demonstrate and model strategies.
12. **Match the text type to the specific strategy.** When teaching and practicing comprehension strategies, the selected text should be well suited for the specific strategy. For example, teaching students to identify the main idea and summarize a text requires the use of an informational text, rather than a narrative text, which conveys a story rather than a main idea that can be summarized.

### Vocabulary Instruction

Vocabulary development is strongly related to reading comprehension, so it is an important target for an intervention to improve comprehension. A student learning a new word may require as many as 12 unique, in-depth exposures to the word in different contexts to develop deep understanding.

13. **Select words for direct instruction carefully.** A common approach for selecting what words to teach students directly is based on the concept of three tiers. Tier 1 words are likely to be known and do not need to be taught. Tier 2 words are likely to appear in multiple domains and should be a central focus of explicit vocabulary instruction. Tier 3 words are rare, domain-specific words that are important for content area learning, and they should be taught only when they are encountered.
14. **Present words' meanings in relation to other words.** Use of graphic organizers, such as a Venn diagram or a tree diagram, helps to demonstrate to the student how words are related to each other.
15. **Use student-friendly definitions to introduce new words.** Students who have accessible definitions, that is, the definitions contain meanings of familiar words and contexts, develop deeper initial understanding. Further, requiring students to memorize definitions, especially definitions containing unfamiliar words and contexts, is not helpful.

16. **Teach a few words deeply.** Overloading the student with too many words during one intervention session is counterproductive. Learning works better when students are taught three or four words in depth, and then other essential words are defined more briefly as they are encountered.
17. **Teach word learning strategies.** Teaching students to use context clues and word parts (prefixes, roots, and suffixes) to figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words will enhance their ability to build vocabulary independently.

### Comprehension Instruction

Comprehension instruction typically occurs at three points in a lesson: before reading, to prepare the student to read the text; during reading, to help the student interpret the text; and after reading, to help the student reflect on the meaning of the text.

18. **Activate prior knowledge before reading begins.** Students' comprehension is greater if they can first relate to the text they will read. For instance, provide a brief preview of the text or describe key concepts, or help the student to make a prediction for discussion after reading.
19. **Provide brief but explicit instruction in comprehension strategies.** Strategies for enhancing comprehension include predicting, questioning, visualizing, clarifying, drawing inferences, retelling, summarizing, and paraphrasing. Students can use the processes they learn during the intervention to think through other reading experiences.
20. **Teach comprehension strategies using a gradual release of responsibility.** Teaching students how to use strategies for improving their reading comprehension should follow steps that advance from direct explanation of strategies and teacher modeling of those strategies, to collaborative use, guided practice, and independent use by the student.
21. **Move from individual comprehension strategies to combined strategies.** Once students have learned to use strategies individually, give the students opportunities to practice using multiple strategies in combination. Examples of interventions using multiple strategies include Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Burish, 2010) for K–6th graders or Reciprocal Teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) for 4th–12th graders.

22. **Teach the student to monitor comprehension.** Strategies that require students to self-monitor during reading include simple fix-up techniques, such as rereading or restating, to assist students in fixing, that is, securing in memory, their comprehension of difficult sections of texts. Self-monitoring flexibly engages students' thinking about their comprehension as they are reading.
23. **Teach the student how to summarize text.** Students' comprehension is deepened by the process of verbally choosing or writing a topic sentence that tells only the main ideas of the text the student just read, and deleting trivial or redundant information.
24. **Teach narrative text structure.** Students learn the elements and structure of narrative texts as teachers guide their attention during narrative text reading. Elements they become familiar with include the characters, setting, goal, problem, plot or action, resolution, and theme.
25. **Teach informational text structures.** Students learn the elements and structure of informational texts in the same way they learn narrative texts. Guiding the students' attention as they read the narrative text helps them become familiar with the elements, such as description, sequence, problem and solution, cause and effect, and compare and contrast.

### Extended Discussion

Extended discussion is an important method of teaching comprehension and a target for intervention, so giving students opportunities to discuss the content of texts during and after reading enhances comprehension and increases students' motivation to read.

26. **Plan high-quality questions.** Good questions allow students to locate and recall, integrate and interpret, and critique and evaluate text ideas. *Locate and recall* questions might focus on identifying main ideas and the supporting details or story elements. *Integrate and interpret* questions might focus on comparing information or characters' actions or drawing inferences from the text. *Critique and evaluate* questions might focus on assessing the text from different perspectives, making connections across texts, or judging whether the text accomplishes the author's purpose.

27. **Move from higher-order questions to follow-up queries.** Asking higher-order questions first allows students to demonstrate their evolving understanding. If the initial question is too difficult, lower-order follow-up queries allow the student to build up to the higher-order target. Follow-up questions might involve asking the student to give a different interpretation, elaborate, or provide evidence in the text to support his or her opinion.

### Motivation Strategies

Being motivated to read makes reading more enjoyable for students but also improves their comprehension. Adolescents with reading difficulties may lack motivation for reading both as a cause and as an effect, so increasing their motivation and engagement is especially important (Boardman et al., 2008).

28. **Link texts to one another.** Teachers can enhance students' experience of reading by finding texts related to their interests, such as themes or topics they enjoy, or to authors they mention. Telling a student that you are locating the special texts will help build anticipation.
29. **Praise the student's efforts.** Acknowledging the student's successful efforts in reading challenging texts will motivate the student and build confidence in reading.
30. **Allow choices in intervention activities.** Giving students a choice of what texts they will read, letting them decide where in the classroom they will read, and allowing them to decide how they want to communicate—whether to discuss or write about the meaning of the text—can increase students' motivation to read for comprehension.

### RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

#### Websites

<http://www.adlit.org>

AdLit.org, an organization dedicated to adolescent literacy, provides strategies and resources for parents and educators of children in grades 4 through 12.

<http://www.readingrockets.org>

Reading Rockets provides evidence-based strategies, lessons, and activities for teachers of beginning and struggling readers.

<http://www.readwritethink.org>

ReadWriteThink provides free materials and lesson plans for teaching reading and language arts for teachers of grades K–12.

### Books

Duffy, G. G. (2014). *Explaining reading: A resource for explicit teaching of the Common Core standards* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

This book provides accessible language for teachers using a gradual release approach to teaching comprehension strategies. The ideas are appropriate for interventions at all grade levels.

Stahl, K. A. D., & Garcia, G. E. (2015). *Developing reading comprehension: Effective instruction for all students in preK–2*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

This book focuses on comprehension in the early primary grades. It describes procedures for developing comprehension using teacher read-alouds and student reading across text types.

### Related Helping Handouts

Reading—Basic Skills: Helping Handout for School  
Reading Fluency Skills: Helping Handout for School  
Reading Skills: Helping Handout for Home

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