**6 Essential Skills for Reading Comprehension**

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**At a Glance**

* Reading comprehension can be challenging for kids.
* Kids must master a number of key skills, like decoding, to fully understand what they’re reading.
* There are ways to help struggling readers build these skills at home and at school.

Some people think of the act of reading as a straightforward task that’s easy to master. In reality, [**it’s a complex process**](https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/reading-issues/video-why-learning-to-read-is-harder-than-learning-to-speak) that draws on many different skills. Together, these skills lead to the ultimate goal of reading: reading comprehension, or understanding what’s been read.

Reading comprehension can be challenging for kids for [**lots of reasons**](https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/reading-issues/understanding-your-childs-trouble-with-reading). Whatever the cause, knowing the skills involved, and which ones your child struggles with, can help you get the right support.

Here are six essential skills needed for reading comprehension, and tips on what can help kids improve this skill.

**1. Decoding**

[**Decoding**](https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/reading-issues/decoding-what-it-is-and-how-it-works) is a vital step in the reading process. Kids use this skill to sound out words they’ve heard before but haven’t seen written out. The ability to do that is the foundation for other reading skills.

Decoding relies on an early language skill called [**phonemic awareness**](https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/reading-issues/phonological-awareness-phonemic-awareness-and-phonics-what-you-need-to-know). (This skill is part of an even broader skill called *phonological awareness*.) Phonemic awareness lets kids hear individual sounds in words (known as *phonemes*). It also allows them to “play” with sounds at the word and syllable level.

Decoding also relies on connecting individual sounds to letters. For instance, to read the word *sun*, kids must know that the letter *s*makes the /s/ sound. Grasping the connection between a letter (or group of letters) and the sounds they typically make is an important step toward “sounding out” words.

**What can help:** Most kids pick up the broad skill of [**phonological awareness**](https://www.understood.org/~/link.aspx?_id=9794DE6780C84105992812A12DB967D8&_z=z) naturally, by being exposed to books, songs, and [**rhymes**](https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/learning-at-home/encouraging-reading-writing/8-childrens-books-featuring-rhyme-and-alliteration). But some kids don’t. In fact, one of the early signs of reading difficulties is trouble with rhyming, counting syllables, or identifying the first sound in a word.

The best way to help kids with these skills is through specific instruction and practice. Kids have to be taught how to identify and work with sounds. You can also [**build phonological awareness**](https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/learning-at-home/encouraging-reading-writing/9-ways-to-build-phonological-awareness-in-pre-k-and-kindergarten) at home through activities like word games and reading to your child.

**2. Fluency**

To read fluently, kids need to instantly recognize words, including [**ones they can’t sound out**](https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/reading-issues/the-difference-between-decodable-and-non-decodable-words). Fluency speeds up the rate at which they can read and understand text. It’s also important when kids encounter irregular words, like *of*and *the*, which can’t be sounded out.

Sounding out or decoding every word can take a lot of effort. *Word recognition* is the ability to recognize whole words instantly by sight, without sounding them out.

When kids can read quickly and without making too many errors, they are “fluent” readers.

Fluent readers read smoothly at a good pace. They group words together to help with meaning, and they use the proper tone in their voice when reading aloud. [**Reading fluency**](https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/reading-issues/why-isnt-my-child-reading-fast-enough) is essential for good reading comprehension.

**What can help:** Word recognition can be a big obstacle for struggling readers. Average readers need to see a word four to 14 times before it becomes a “ **[sight word](https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/reading-issues/at-a-glance-star-words-by-grade)**” they automatically recognize. Kids with dyslexia, for instance, may need to see it up to 40 times.

Lots of kids struggle with reading fluency. As with other reading skills, kids need lots of specific instruction and practice to improve word recognition.

The main way to [**help build this skill**](https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/partnering-with-childs-school/instructional-strategies/7-ways-to-improve-reading-fluency) is through practice reading books. It’s important to [**pick out books that are at the right level**](https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/learning-at-home/encouraging-reading-writing/4-steps-to-choosing-books-at-your-childs-reading-level) of difficulty for kids.

**3. Vocabulary**

To understand what you’re reading, you need to understand most of the words in the text. Having a strong vocabulary is a key component of reading comprehension. Students can learn vocabulary through instruction. But they typically learn the meaning of words through everyday experience and also by reading.

**What can help:** The more words kids are exposed to, the richer their vocabulary becomes. You can help [**build your child’s vocabulary**](https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/partnering-with-childs-school/instructional-strategies/7-ways-to-improve-vocabulary) by having frequent conversations on a variety of topics. Try to include new words and ideas. Telling jokes and playing word games is a fun way to build this skill.

Reading together every day also helps improve vocabulary. When reading aloud, stop at new words and define them. But also encourage your child to read alone. Even without hearing a definition of a new word, your child can use context to help figure it out.

Teachers can help, too. They can carefully choose interesting words to teach and then give explicit instruction (instruction that is specialized and direct). They can engage students in conversation. And they can make learning vocabulary fun by playing word games in class.

For more ideas, watch as an expert explains [**how to help struggling readers build their vocabulary**](https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/learning-at-home/encouraging-reading-writing/video-helping-struggling-readers-build-their-vocabulary).

**4. Sentence Construction and Cohesion**

Understanding how sentences are built might seem like a [**writing skill**](https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/writing-issues/6-skills-kids-need-for-written-expression). So might connecting ideas within and between sentences, which is called *cohesion*. But these skills are important for reading comprehension as well.

Knowing how ideas link up at the sentence level helps kids get meaning from passages and entire texts. It also leads to something called *coherence*, or the ability to connect ideas to other ideas in an overall piece of writing.

**What can help:** Explicit instruction can teach kids the basics of sentence construction. For example, teachers can work with students on connecting two or more thoughts, through both writing and reading.

**5. Reasoning and Background Knowledge**

Most readers relate what they’ve read to what they know. So it’s important for kids to have background or prior knowledge about the world when they read. They also need to be able to “read between the lines” and pull out meaning even when it’s not literally spelled out.

Take this example: A child is reading a story about a poor family in the 1930s. Having knowledge about the Great Depression can provide insight into what’s happening in the story. The child can use that background knowledge to make inferences and draw conclusions.

**What can help:** Your child can build knowledge through reading, conversations, movies and TV shows, and art. Life experience and hands-on activities also [**build knowledge**](https://www.understood.org/en/community-events/blogs/teacher-tips/2017/06/06/teacher-tip-the-most-fun-way-to-build-reading-skills-for-back-to-school).

Expose your child to as much as possible, and talk about what you’ve learned from experiences you’ve had together and separately. Help your child make connections between new knowledge and existing knowledge. And ask open-ended questions that require thinking and explanations.

You can also read a teacher tip on [**using animated videos to help your child make inferences**](https://www.understood.org/en/community-events/blogs/teacher-tips/2017/04/12/teacher-tip-use-animated-videos-to-help-your-child-learn-to-make-inferences).

**6. Working Memory and Attention**

These two skills are both part of a group of abilities known as [**executive function**](https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/executive-functioning-issues/3-areas-of-executive-function). They’re [**different but closely related**](https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/distractibility-inattention/attention-how-its-different-from-working-memory).

When kids read, attention allows them to take in information from the text. [**Working memory**](https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/executive-functioning-issues/working-memory-what-it-is-and-how-it-works) allows them to hold on to that information and use it to gain meaning and build knowledge from what they’re reading.

The ability to [**self-monitor**](https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/executive-functioning-issues/4-ways-kids-use-self-monitoring-to-learn) while reading is also tied to that. Kids need to be able to recognize when they don’t understand something. Then they need to stop, go back, and re-read to clear up any confusion they may have.

**What can help:** There are many ways you can help improve your child’s working memory. Skillbuilders don’t have to feel like work, either. There are a number of games and everyday activities that can [**build working memory**](https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/learning-at-home/homework-study-skills/8-working-memory-boosters) without kids even knowing it.

To help increase your child’s attention, look for reading material that’s interesting or motivating. For example, some kids may like [**graphic novels**](https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/learning-at-home/encouraging-reading-writing/how-graphic-novels-can-help-kids-with-reading-issues). Encourage your child to stop and re-read when something isn’t clear. And demonstrate how you “think aloud” when you read to make sure what you’re reading makes sense.

**More Ways to Help With Reading Comprehension**

When kids struggle with one or more of these skills, they can have trouble fully understanding what they read. Find out [**how to tell if your child has difficulty with reading comprehension**](https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/reading-issues/how-can-i-tell-if-my-child-understands-what-she-reads).

Learn about what can cause [**trouble with reading in kids**](https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/reading-issues/understanding-your-childs-trouble-with-reading). Keep in mind that having reading difficulties doesn’t mean a child isn’t smart. But some kids need extra support and encouragement to make progress.

**Key Takeaways**

* Decoding, fluency, and vocabulary skills are key to reading comprehension.
* Being able to connect ideas within and between sentences helps kids understand the whole text.
* Reading aloud and talking about experiences can help kids build reading skills.