

## Comprehension skills

Reading comprehension is the ability to read text, process it, and understand its meaning. An individual's ability to comprehend text is influenced by their traits and skills, one of which is the ability to make inferences.

There are ten basic skills that applied to read comprehensions.

1. Summarizing
2. Sequencing
3. Inferencing
4. Comparing and contrasting
5. Drawing conclusions
6. Self-questioning
7. Problem-solving
8. Relating background knowledge
9. Distinguishing between fact and opinion
10. Finding the main idea, important facts, and supporting details

These skills are particularly important for comprehending what is generally known as information reading or expository reading.

### Summarizing:

Summarizing allows both students and teachers to monitor comprehension of material. Summarizing helps students understand the organizational structure of lessons or texts. Summarizing is a skill at which most adults must be proficient to be successful.

### Why use summarizing?

It helps students learn to determine essential ideas and consolidate important details that support them.

It enables students to focus on key words and phrases of an assigned text that are worth noting and remembering.

It teaches students how to take a large selection of text and reduce it to the main points for more concise understanding.

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### Sequencing:

Sequencing refers to the identification of the components of a story, such as the beginning, middle, and end, and also to the ability to retell the events within a given text in the order in which they occurred. The ability to sequence events in a text is a key comprehension strategy, especially for narrative texts.

### Why Is It Important?

As students listen to or read text, they are best served if they can understand the information as it is presented and then recall it at a later point. Beginning readers and those that have not had much opportunity to work on their sequencing skills have a tendency to retell a story by starting with the end, since it is the part that they read or heard most recently. Even more experienced readers may re-tell a story by focusing primarily on the sections that were most appealing to them rather than by giving a more complete picture of the events that occurred. (Fox and Allen, 1983)

Practicing sequencing helps remedy both of these issues and makes this aspect of reading comprehension second nature. If students are encouraged to identify the parts of a story, for instance, they will be better able to retell it to someone else, as it is a more manageable task to think of a story in pieces—the beginning, middle, and end—rather than try to recall it as one large chunk. Sequencing activities also provide an opportunity for students to examine text and story structure, which, in turn, strengthens their writing skills.

Inferencing:

Inference in reading is the ability to understand the meaning of a passage of text without all the information being spelled out. From context clues within a passage, the author gives information about plot, characters, setting, time period and other elements of story by the things he or she infers.

## INFERENCE IS ESSENTIAL TO READING COMPREHENSION

Inference is drawing conclusions based on information that has been implied rather than directly stated and is an essential skill in reading comprehension. We make inferences every day, both in oral and written communication. Many times this is so automatic we don't even realize the information wasn't included in the conversation or text. For example, read the following sentences:

*My wife and I tried to pack light but we made sure not to forget our bathing suits and sunblock. I wasn't sure if I would get seasick again so I made sure to pack some medicine for upset stomachs.*

You can deduct a great deal of information from these sentences:

- The author is married.
- He and his wife are going on a trip.
- They are going to be on a boat.
- They will be around water.
- They will be going swimming.
- They have gone swimming before.
- The author has gotten seasick on a boat in the past.

This information was not clearly stated in the sentences, but you can use what was written to deduce or infer, much more than what was said. Most of the information we get from reading comes from what is implied rather than direct statements as you can see from the amount of information we got from "reading between the lines." previously.

Comparing and contrasting:

Definition of Comparing and Contrasting. Comparing and contrasting are ways of exploring the similarities and differences between two things. 'Compare and contrast' is often used as a development strategy for essay assignments, but it's a helpful strategy for any important decisions you have to make.

## Drawing conclusions:

Drawing conclusions is using information that is implied or inferred to make meaning out of what is not clearly stated. Writers give readers hints or clues that help them read between the lines, since not everything is explicitly stated or spelled out all the time.

## Self-questioning:

Self-Questioning is the ongoing process of asking questions before, during, and after reading that are used by a reader to understand text. The questions posed are based on clues that are found in the text and are generated to spark curiosity that focuses the reader's attention on investigating, understanding, and connecting to the text. A self-questioning strategy is a set of steps that a student follows to generate, think about, predict, investigate, and answer questions that satisfy curiosity about what is being read.

## Who can benefit from instruction in Self-Questioning Strategies?

Some students can generate questions fairly well. However, as text becomes more difficult, becomes more abstract, increases in length, is more inconsiderate, or the student does not have sufficient background knowledge, comprehension will falter and more deliberate work on self-questioning is required. Struggling readers may need instruction and practice in surveying text and generating questions before they read; other students may need instruction and practice in using self-questioning as they read; others might use self-questioning as a way of summarizing or studying. Regardless of when the self-questioning process is used, the basic components of the strategy are the same.

## What are the types of Self-Questioning Strategies that I might teach?

Self-Questioning is used before, during, and after reading text. However, if students do not know or use self-questioning as an ongoing strategy during reading, they are likely to have trouble with before and after use of the strategy. Therefore, a self-questioning strategy for use during reading is described first in some detail, followed by descriptions of how the strategy is used before and after reading.

The During Reading Self-Questioning Strategy. This strategy focuses on teaching the students to use a self-questioning process as they read paragraphs and sections of text.

The Before Reading Self-Questioning Strategy. This strategy focuses on teaching students to use the self-questioning process as a way of previewing text before reading begins and creating a set of guiding questions to check comprehension during reading.

The After Reading Self-Questioning Strategy. This strategy focuses on teaching students to generate questions and answer questions after they have read the text. This strategy is usually used for studying and self-testing information that should have been gained from the text.

## How do you teach the After Reading Self-Questioning Strategy?

Select the After Reading Self-Questioning Strategy to teach as a simple follow-up to instruction in the During Reading Self-Questioning Strategy. To promote self-questioning after reading larger chunks of materials, Section and Multi-Section Summarization Strategies may be more appropriate.

Before you start asking students to develop post reading questions, explain to them the purpose of learning how to use post reading questioning. Focus your rationale on the idea that revisiting questions readers have asked and generating questions about what was read help answer the "So what?" question and confirm what was learned from the author. It also gives a chance to determine if the reader agrees or not or whether there is a need to know more.

Describe the strategy and make a list of the steps on the overhead or board. Ask students to write the steps of the strategy and what each step means in their notes. The critical steps of the strategy that you could describe might include these steps:

Step 1: Explore the "Look Back" questions:

Looking back, I know...

(Based on what the author has revealed, how has my knowledge has changed?)

Looking back, I think...

(Based on what the author has revealed, do I agree?)

Looking back, I question...

(Based on what the author has revealed, what additional questions do you have?)

Looking back, I feel...

(Based on what the author has revealed, what emotions do you feel?)

Looking back, I predict...

(Based on what the author has revealed, what do you think will happen in the future?)

Step 2: Name a big organizing question.

Based on your answers to the Look Back questions, create one big question that you think captures the big question for what you have read. Develop a question you think the author would be most pleased if you could answer.

Step 3: Developing big answer.

Develop an answer to your big organizing question. Develop an answer you think would get you an "A" on the test for capturing the main idea of this reading.

Problem-solving:

Problem solving requires two distinct types of mental skill, analytical and creative.

Analytical or logical thinking includes skills such as ordering, comparing, contrasting, evaluating and selecting. It provides a logical framework for problem solving and helps to select the best alternative from those available by narrowing down the range of possibilities (a convergent process).. Analytical thinking often predominates in solving closed problems, where the many possible causes have to be identified and analysed to find the real cause.

Creative thinking is a divergent process, using the imagination to create a large range of ideas for solutions. It requires us to look beyond the obvious, creating ideas which may, at first, seem unrealistic or have no logical connection with the problem. There is a large element of creative thinking in solving open problems.

The creative thinking skills can be divided into several key elements:

- fluency - producing many ideas
- flexibility - producing a broad range of ideas. originality - producing uncommon ideas
- elaboration - developing ideas.

Effective problem solving requires a controlled mixture of analytical and creative thinking.

Research has shown that, in general terms, each side or hemisphere of the brain is specialised to serve one of these groups of skills. The degree of specialisation of each hemisphere varies from person to person, but it has given rise to the terms right-brain thinking and left-brain thinking. Left-brain thinking is more logical and analytical, and is predominantly verbal. Right-brain thinking is more holistic and is concerned with feelings and impressionistic relationships.

To be a good problem solver you need to be able to switch from one group of skills to the other and back again, although this is not always easy. Traditional education gives far greater encouragement to the development and use of left-brain thinking. This is reinforced in the way we are required to work, where emphasis is placed on rational, logical analysis of data in drawing conclusions.

Some other terms which are often used in discussions of creativity include:

Intuition - the ability to draw conclusions based on impressions and feelings rather than hard facts. It is a characteristic of right-brain thinking and some people rely on it more than others.

Incubation - the period between stopping conscious work on a problem and the time when we become aware of a solution or part solution. People struggling with problems often suddenly become aware of a solution after a period of incubation, during which the mind is occupied by other things.

Invention - the creation of new, meaningful ideas or concepts.

Innovation - putting new ideas or concepts to a practical use, as in the development of a new product or service.

Relating background knowledge:

Call it schema, relevant background knowledge, prior knowledge, or just plain experience, when students make connections to the text they are reading, their comprehension increases. Good readers constantly try to make sense out of what they read by seeing how it fits with what they already know.

Why is background knowledge so important?

It makes good sense that to comprehend a story or text, readers will need a threshold of knowledge about the topic. Sometimes we call it domain-specific knowledge or topical

knowledge. Without such knowledge, it becomes difficult to construct a meaningful mental model of what the text is about. Consider the following examples.

Background knowledge enables readers to choose between multiple meanings of words

For example, think about the word *operation*. If you were to read the word in a sports article about the Yankees, you might think about Derek Jeter recovering from his latest baseball injury. If you read the word in a math text, on the other hand, you'd think about a mathematical process like multiplication or division. Words have multiple purposes and meanings, and their meanings in particular instances are cued by the reader's domain knowledge.

Reading and listening require readers to make inferences from text that rely on background knowledge

Even the most immediate oral language exchanges, like “What do you say?” to a young child who just received some Halloween candy, require some level of inferencing. From infancy on, oral language comprehension requires children to actively construct meaning by supplying missing knowledge and making inferences. This, of course, becomes even more complicated when we turn to written texts, since it may require students to make inferences based on limited information in the text itself. In fact, many of our greatest writers engage readers through their writing to think beyond the text.

Understanding text depends on readers supplying enough of the unstated premises to make coherent sense of what is being read. But to do this well, readers need to have a foundation of knowledge about the topic. Otherwise, as studies have shown, they can get caught on the “seductive details” (Garner, Gillingham, & White, 1989) of a text—highly interesting and entertaining information that is only tangentially related to the topic—which can distract the reader and disrupt the comprehension of text. Background knowledge, in contrast, acts as a road map for students, allowing them to stay on target despite the interesting details. This suggests that once print has been decoded into words, reading comprehension and listening comprehension requires the active construction of inferences that rely on background knowledge and are implicit in the text.

Literacy language requires background knowledge:

Second-language learners know for certain that many metaphors, idioms, and other literary devices are based on background knowledge. For example, if we say that you “really hit the ball out of the park” after you gave a presentation to your colleagues, you would quickly understand the compliment. We know that it can't be taken literally because we know what the saying refers to. Writings are heavily dependent on metaphors and idioms. Studies (e.g., Ortony, Schallert, Reynolds, & Antos, 1978) have shown that idioms are often processed just as rapidly as literal meanings, indicating that we are constantly activating background knowledge in comprehension.

Informational text requires background knowledge

Informational text tends to have a greater density of vocabulary and concepts that are directly related to students' background knowledge (Price, Bradley, & Smith, 2012). And these demands placed on background knowledge only accelerate as students progress through the grade levels. Students will be required to apply previously learned concepts to increasingly complex text. They must read, discuss, and write about topics that are conceptually more difficult, and they will need to increasingly draw on intertextual linkages

across subject areas. They'll be required to provide evidence from text, show deep and thorough understanding of these concepts, and think creatively about applying these concepts in new ways.

Consequently, in much of the literature in reading, we have focused on skills associated with comprehension: decoding, vocabulary development, strategy instruction, and metacognition, among many others. But what we can see from this brief summary is that we have given very little instructional time to a skill that can play an enormous role in comprehending text. We would venture to guess that students' understanding of text is unlikely to improve unless we begin to more deliberately teach background knowledge.

#### Distinguishing between fact and opinion:

A fact is a statement that can be proven true or false. An opinion is an expression of a person's feelings that cannot be proven. Opinions can be based on facts or emotions and sometimes they are meant to deliberately mislead others.

Therefore, it is important to be aware of the author's purpose and choice of language. Sometimes, the author lets the facts speak for themselves.

#### Finding the main idea, important facts, and supporting details:

The main idea of a passage is often stated in a sentence within the passage. It helps readers understand the most important idea about what is being read. The other sentences of the passage include pieces of information that tell more about the most important idea. These are called the supporting details.

Understanding the general idea of a text can be tricky for beginning, emerging, or even established readers. It can require time, brain power, and hard work to determine the main idea of a passage. Learning how to use the main idea and supporting details is an essential piece to a reader's success in comprehending text.

You may wish to use the following terms:

- Topic – the subject, what the text is about
- Main idea – most important idea about the topic (usually a sentence)
- supporting details – bits of information used to support main idea