

Teaching for Comprehension Strategies

Thoughtful, active proficient readers are metacognitive; they think about their own thinking during reading.

Proficient readers know when their understanding of text is successful and when it has fallen apart. As a reader is reading, he/she uses the following key comprehension strategies:

- Making Connections
- Creating Mental Images
- Questioning
- Determining Importance
- Making Inferences
- Synthesizing

Modeling Comprehension Strategies

By modeling for students the types of behaviors good readers are engaged in as they read, we are providing them with the opportunity to become aware of the many strategies and monitoring behaviors that good readers use.

When good readers are reading relatively simple texts these strategic behaviors are fairly automatic. Good readers only become aware of their strategy use when they recognize that they are failing to comprehend. They are cognizant of the need to reevaluate their strategy use in order to remedy their failure to comprehend. Good readers are more likely to fall back on appropriate strategies when the need to change strategies becomes apparent.

For most poor readers however, using a variety of strategies, using strategies appropriately, and monitoring strategies is not automatic. Therefore modeling strategic behaviors for struggling readers by thinking aloud during reading (and hence, allowing students to think along), is the first step in raising their awareness of what it means to be a strategic reader.

Coached Practice

By engaging poor readers in coached-practice in the think aloud method, teachers are providing students with the opportunity and guidance they need to choose useful, appropriate strategies to enhance reading comprehension. Teachers are encouraging them to think about why and when to use certain strategies, and providing them with the tools they need to successfully monitor their own comprehension. With enough modeling and coached-practice, students will be on their way to becoming independent users of strategies.

Assessing Student Use of Comprehension Strategies

The teacher can assess student understanding and use of comprehension strategies during the following learning experiences:

- Shared reading discussions
- Guided reading group observations
- Independent reading conferences

When do I Teach the Comprehension Strategies?

The strategies should be introduced and explicitly taught and modeled early in the school year. The strategies should be introduced one at a time. After the initial introduction (which should take about week), the strategies should be used and modeled on a daily basis in all content areas. It is during this future work, that you develop a deeper understanding of the strategies. It is important after the initial introduction for strategy use to be integrated. For example, when reading, good readers will make connections, ask questions, determine importance, and synthesize simultaneously; they don't use or rely on one strategy at a time. Students are expected to apply and verbalize their use of the strategies during guided and independent reading.

Reflection on Strategy Use

Reflecting on the process of thinking aloud as they read, encourages students to recognize the difference between reading the words and comprehending the text. By talking about their strategy use, students gain insights into the complexities of reading, and expand their understanding of what it means to be a "good reader."

Student Expectations: During the week, students should have the opportunity to reflect on reading in the following ways:

- write/talk about how they have used a specific strategy to help them read (this can be an independent book, guided reading book, content area book, or any other reading material)
- write/talk about story elements in fictional texts, such as characterization, setting, plot, author's purpose, or about text structure in nonfiction material
- respond to a piece of text in a personal way, for example what they found interesting, funny, unusual, or something they learned

Making Connections

Definition: When students have had an experience that helps them relate to what is happening in the story, they are making connections. There are three types of connections. Text-to-self connections are connections that readers make between the text and their past experiences. Text-to-text connections are connections that readers make between the text they are reading and another text. Text-to-world connections are connections that readers make between text and the issues, events, or concerns of society and the world at large.

Before, during and after reading, connections are being made when readers are...

- using their background or prior knowledge to better understand the new material they are reading and in turn are more able to remember and reapply what they have read
- engaging in conversation about what they read
- making text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections that help to better their understanding

Modeling:

1. Begin by reading stories that are close to the lives and experiences of students.
2. Then move from close to home to more global issues by modeling through Think Alouds.
3. To help students make connections while they are reading, ask students questions that encourage them to...
 - point out parts of the story that remind them of things in their own lives
 - make connections to other stories they have read
 - discuss, draw, and write about these connections

Questions and Prompts:

- Have you ever...? Have you had...?
- This reminds me of... The setting reminds me of...
- This character_____ is like_____ because...
- This is similar to..., This part is like...
- I also (name something in the text that has also happened personally to student)...
- This character makes me think of...
- In the first paragraph, the main character...
- This makes me think of another story where...
- This is helping me with/to think about....

Creating Mental Images / Visualizing

Definition: Creating Mental Images is a process that proficient readers use before, during, and after reading. Active readers create visual images in their minds based on the words they read. The pictures readers create, enhance their understanding. Images come from all five senses and the emotions and are anchored in the reader's prior knowledge. This process is also referred to as Visualizing and Picturing.

Before, during and after reading, creating mental images occurs when readers...

- immerse themselves in rich detail as they read
- make the text more memorable
- draw conclusions
- create distinct and unique interpretations of the text
- recall a text after it has been read
- use personal experiences to deepen comprehension
- adapt their images as new information is revealed through the text and new interpretations are developed
- adapt their images in response to the shared images of other readers

Modeling:

The teacher models creating mental images frequently, using short selections that allow the teacher to...

- think aloud about his/her own process of creating images before, during, and after reading
- explicitly think aloud about how images enhance comprehension
- gradually invite students to share their own images from a variety of text
- facilitate and encourage small group discussion of shared text that influenced their images
- record students' use of the strategy in reading conferences
- continue to model throughout a strategy study using a variety of texts of different genre and levels of difficulty

Questions, Prompts, and Activities:

- **"Create pictures in your mind/make a picture in your brain** – as the teacher provides a verbal description of things with which the students are familiar.
- **"I imagine"**- to stimulate their thinking using all their senses.
- **Preview a text to be read-** focus on the illustrations, charts, and graphics.
- **Use Guided Imagery-** the teacher tells students to close their eyes and relax as she/he guides the students to think more deeply about a topic as he/she provides a detailed description of the setting, the action, sensory images, emotions, etc. Students open their eyes and in small groups share the pictures they made in their minds. Clarify confusions and answer questions. Have students write or draw information gathered from guided imagery.
- **For narrative text-** "Is my mental picture of the wolf still good?" "Why should I change it?"
- **For expository text-** "What did an American soldier look like?" "A British soldier?"

- **Sketch to Stretch-** Have students sketch what the text means to them; assure them there are many ways to represent personal meanings. Facilitate a group share where all group members give their interpretation to the sketch; the artist then tells his/her interpretation.
- **Open Mind Portrait-** Draw and color a portrait of a story character or a famous person from a biography. Trace and cut out several blank faces. On the blank pages, students draw or write about the person's thoughts and feelings throughout the text.

Questioning

Definition: The comprehension strategy of questioning requires the reader to make inquiries, speculate possibilities, and seek answers to enhance understanding of the text before, during and after reading. Asking questions is the strategy that keeps readers engaged.

Before, during or after reading, questioning occurs when readers ...

- activate prior knowledge
- make predictions
- clarify meaning
- speculate about text yet to be read
- determine an author's purpose
- determine whether the answer is explicitly in the text or infer using text information and background knowledge to create their own interpretation
- inspire new thinking

Modeling:

1. Choose a picture book that will spur a lot of questions.
2. As the teachers reads the book aloud to the students, he/she should stop, think aloud, and share wonderings about unfamiliar words, text structure, character actions, etc. as well as question the author.
3. Write questions on Post-it notes, and place them in the spot in the book where they occurred. Show the class the notes written. Point out that you are going to leave the notes sticking out a little, like bookmarks, so they can be found later.
4. Tell the students that sometimes when reading on, questions are answered. Explain that when that happens, they should mark the Post-it notes with an 'A' for 'Answered' and move it to the place in the text where they found that answer. It is also important to explain that some of the most important questions aren't answered, but are best left to discussions during and after reading.

Questions and Prompts:

- I'm speculating
- I'm wondering... and now I know...
- I'm noticing...
- Why did/is....?
- How come...?
- What if...?

Determining Importance

Definition: Determining Importance means picking out the most important information when reading, to highlight essential ideas, to isolate supporting details, and to read for specific information.

Teachers need to help readers sift and sort information, and make decisions about what information they need to remember and what information they can disregard.

During and after reading, determining importance occurs when readers...

- distinguish between what is merely interesting and what is important
- identify the topic, supporting details, and identify main idea or summary statement
- realize that not all of the text is of equal value
- identify essential ideas and salient information in order to develop insight

Modeling:

1. Introduce the strategy by reading a nonfiction book aloud to students. After reading the book, talk to students about what the key points and the interesting details in the text and mark the key points with Post-it notes.
2. Continue to model thinking in this way over the next several days and identify key information in texts that is important to remember. Plan guided practice opportunities in other selections for determining key information from interesting details.
3. Point out additional text features that signal importance in the text, such as fonts, cue words, illustrations and photographs, graphics, text organizers, and text structure.
4. Pair students to work together in nonfiction text following this same process.
5. Confer with student pairs as they work to support and assess their thinking.

Questions and Prompts:

- What is the key information? How did you decide on what was important and what were interesting details?
- Look carefully at the first and last line of each paragraph when determining importance.
- Tell me about some of the important ideas that struck you.
- Highlight only necessary words and phrases.
- What features can you find in the text that will help you decide on what is key?
- How should your purpose affect the way you read the text?
- What does the text appear to be about?
- What are some of the major topics covered by the text?

Making Inferences

Definition: Inferring is a mental process that involves combining what is read, with the reader's prior knowledge. When proficient readers infer, they create meaning that is not stated explicitly in the text.

During and after reading, inferences are made when readers...

- actively search for or are aware of implied meaning
- draw conclusions from text
- make reasonable predictions as they read and revise as they gather new information
- use the combination of their background knowledge and explicitly stated information from the text to answer questions they have as they read
- arrive at new insight to understand complex concepts
- make critical or analytical judgments about what they read

Modeling:

1. Introduce the strategy with short scenarios that require students to add up the text clues and evaluate them based on their own experiences.

Example: Your neighbors like to go camping. You see them putting camping gear in the car. You overhear one of them say they better not forget to cancel the newspaper for a month.

You ask, "What is this family getting ready to do?" "How do you know?" Refer to the text and students' experiences.

2. Select a short text whose key understandings are implied. Read the text aloud to the class. Let the class collaborate to develop inferences. The teacher may notice that some students are "text bound" and take the passage literally. Others may rely on their own experiences. Guide students to see there must be a balance between what occurs between a reader's prior knowledge and the text. Outline four concrete steps for making inferences:
 - a. Pose "I wonder" questions.
 - b. Examine the text for important clues about what the author is leaving unsaid.
 - c. Connect what you already know to what information is in the text.
 - d. Return to your "I wonder" question and see if you can generate some possible answers.

Questions and Prompts:

- I'm guessing that...
- I predict this will happen next.
- What is the author trying to tell us?
- What caused this to happen? (The story doesn't say. I have to figure it out.)
- What would you say is the main idea of this text?

Synthesizing

Definition: Synthesizing is the most complex of comprehension strategies. It is the process of combining new ideas with what is already known to get something new and different. When synthesizing, take individual pieces of information and combine them with prior knowledge. Then form a new idea from these pieces of information.

During and after reading, synthesis takes place when readers...

- are aware of changes in their conclusions about text as their thinking about a given piece evolves and/or as the text itself changes
- monitor the overall meaning and themes in the text as they read and are aware of the ways text elements “fit together” to create that overall meaning and theme
- are aware of text elements in fiction and nonfiction and understand that text elements provide clues to help them predict and understand the overall meanings or themes
- actively revise their thinking about a text as they read
- can articulate how using synthesis helps them better understand what is read

Modeling:

1. Introduce the strategy by using concrete examples of familiar tasks which combine steps such as doing a jigsaw puzzle, baking a cake, and building with Legos. These are activities that involve putting assorted parts together to make a new whole, which is what synthesizing is all about.
2. Charting information during read alouds is a helpful way to get students to understand synthesizing. While reading to the students, the teacher uses the think aloud model to record information on a chart to give students an organizational system to record the components in order to have pieces to assemble into a coherent whole. Mysteries allow an excellent opportunity for this kind of problem solving.
3. In fiction, the teacher thinks aloud to explicitly show how attending more directly to character, setting, conflict resolution, and theme helps the reader to “figure out” (or synthesize) what the story is all about and be able to draw conclusions and compare characters, themes, and resolutions with this story and other texts or compare an author’s craft in different stories.
4. In nonfiction, the teacher explicitly shows how text patterns such as chronological order, cause and effect, and sequence of events enable the reader to make decisions about the overall meaning of a passage, chapter, or book. The text format should be pointed out and can be charted for students to use to find information.

Questions, Prompts, and Activities:

- If you were to tell another person about the text you just read, and you could only use a few sentences, what would you tell them?
- Think about what you have just said about the text. What do you understand now that you didn't understand before?
- Written or oral responses to reading are key elements to the successful synthesis of new information and literary experiences. Keys to student success are the use of:
 - multiple teacher demonstrations of written responses
 - regular two-way response between student and teacher
 - readers keep in mind suggestions to "think on paper"
 - prompts, if necessary, such as:
 - I learned...
 - The confusing thing is...
 - I was surprised...
 - I began to think of...
 - I don't really understand ...
 - I think...
 - If I were....
 - At first I thought and now I think...
 - At first I felt, now I feel...
 - I have been changed by this book in this way...
 - From reading this text, I will remember...
 - The theme in this text was...
 - An "aha" from the reading was...
 - A light bulb went on in my head and I realized...
 - My opinion on this topic now is...
 - I will remember the visual I built in my mind for...

Adapted: Newport News Public Schools Literacy Handbook, Harvey, Goodvis