

*predicting*  
*clarifying*  
*questioning*  
*summarising*  
*connecting*  
*visualising*  
*noting text structure*  
*thinking aloud*

## Reading comprehension

*Comprehension involves what the reader brings to the text as well as what the reader understands from the text.*

- Comprehension is not a single mental process. It is a complex combination of component parts which work together to help the reader understand the text.
- Comprehension results from readers applying strategies that support and deepen understanding.
- Teachers can draw attention to, and model, the use of these strategies so that young readers can develop the ability to use them independently.
- Teacher questioning should offer models for questions readers might ask themselves when they read, and young readers' independent questioning should be encouraged.
- All kinds of texts - film, picturebooks, poetry, plays, fiction and non-fiction - should form part of the comprehension repertoire.

Comprehension lies at the heart of reading. It has been defined in a variety of ways but essentially involves getting to grips with a text. UKLA supports the view that comprehension is a highly complex process, involving a range of components which work together to help readers make sense of what they are reading. They have to be able to understand words and phrases, and integrate them across sentences. They also have to link this understanding to their background knowledge and fill in any gaps by way making inferences. Tennent (2015) describes comprehension as made up from three areas:

- linguistic processes: including words and sentences, for example, an individual's current understanding of words, phrases and sentences and how these combine together to make meaning

- knowledge bases: including general knowledge, domain knowledge (related to a particular area, e.g. cricket), and pragmatic or cultural knowledge applied to the text currently being read
- cognitive/metacognitive processes: including:
  - short term and long term memory. Short term or working memory ensures that the reader remembers words and sentences that have just been read, or at the very least the gist of them. Long term memory is used to apply general knowledge to the text to make connections that support understanding
  - comprehension monitoring or continuous checking that the reading makes sense
  - phonic decoding/word recognition (one of a wide range of components which enable readers to make sense of text)
  - inference making.

Without inference, reading does not make sense. Williams (2014) sees inference as an essential ingredient of reading comprehension which allows the reader to discover implications under the surface of the literal text. However, there are many different types of inference. Tennent (2015) has identified 32 different types but then grouped them into two major categories: coherence inferences and interrogative inferences:

*Coherence* inferences ensure that the reading makes sense. This will include inferring what words mean from their context.

*Interrogative* inferences help the reader to understand texts at a deeper level. The reader interrogates the text while they are reading and also when reflecting on what has been read, whether it is a sentence or two or after reading the whole text.

Making meaning from texts requires young (and experienced) readers to apply these processes interactively. The job of the teacher is to help young readers to develop the ability to do so effectively.

Because comprehension is an outcome of a range of cognitive processes, it cannot be taught directly. However, strategies to aid comprehension can be taught. The following list, adapted from Tennent *et al.*, 2016, identifies the main strategies readers draw on when comprehending text.

<b>Strategies</b>	<b>What the strategy involves</b>
<b>Predicting</b>	making a logically plausible guess as to what will happen next
<b>Clarifying</b>	checking how specific words and phrases have been understood
<b>Questioning</b>	asking questions about the text to expose different layers of meaning
<b>Summarising</b>	stating the main events, actions, or ideas in the text
<b>Connecting</b>	making connections to previous experience, including other texts
<b>Noting text structure</b>	highlighting the main linguistic features in a specific text-type
<b>Visualising</b>	developing a visual image of written text
<b>Thinking aloud</b>	reading a few sentences or a paragraph and verbalising what has been understood. Then repeating this activity across a text.

Experienced readers actively engage with the text by constantly asking questions of the text as they read, even if they are not conscious of doing so. Children come to school saturated with experience of texts of all kinds which they constantly wonder about and ask questions. Nystrand (2006) emphasises the importance of authentic dialogue about what is being read, particularly if it draws on children's personal and cultural experience.

### Asking questions

The questions that readers can be asked about the text they are reading, or have just read, can help them to access different layers of meaning. When teachers model how to ask questions about what they are reading, children can learn how to ask questions of the text when they read independently and the process can be 'handed over' to them. Teacher questions should offer models for questions readers might ask when they read to lead to independent questioning both in and beyond teacher led sessions. There is agreement (Raphael and Pearson, 1985; Raphael and Wonnacott, 1985; Duke and Pearson, 2002; Duke, 2005; Tennent *et al.*, 2016) that three main question types support comprehension: 'looking', 'clue' and 'thinking' questions:

- Looking questions direct readers to what is explicit in the text. They are designed to develop literal comprehension.
- Clue questions ask the reader to think and search; the answer can be found in the text but some level of inference-making will be required. They require young readers to make connections and find evidence in the text to support the development of understanding.
- Thinking questions require children to bring their background knowledge (world, domain and pragmatic) to bear on the reading. These questions encourage evaluation of the text, opinions or moral judgements.

Reciprocal teaching was devised by Palincsar and Brown (1984) as a process for developing and monitoring comprehension with groups of children. Teachers and other adults work with children to develop deeper understandings of texts through focused conversations designed to develop both cognitive and metacognitive awareness. Four specific comprehension strategies can provide a sequence for teaching sessions: predicting, questioning, seeking clarification and summarising (Palincsar and Brown, 1984; Brown and Palincsar, 1989). Connections can be encouraged explicitly through prediction: How do you think it will end? Does it remind you of another text you have read? and questioning using the three types of question: looking, clue and thinking. Teachers can use these four key strategies as the focus for developing comprehension through interaction with a group of young readers.

Comprehension is also influenced by the reader's stance towards the text (Pardo, 2004), created by a complex mesh of factors such as:

- the influence of their home culture
- the value placed on reading in their wider cultural contexts
- their previous experiences of reading and being read to
- their expectations that reading should carry meaning
- their motivation for reading
- their view of themselves as a reader
- the purpose for reading the text
- the reading environments they experience.

Readers also vary in the cognitive capacities they bring to bear on the reading task. Given this wide range of variables it is no surprise that children vary in their comprehension abilities. But research and good classroom practice make clear that all children can learn how to get better at reading comprehension.

A further important aspect of reading comprehension is the development of a critical stance in children's personal responses to texts. In a world where children are bombarded with written and media texts and can freely access information from a wide range of sources via the internet, it is important that they are helped to consider critically how they are being positioned as a reader and the reliability of what they read. Sound comprehension is an important factor in developing critical literacy.

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## Classroom example

### Developing comprehension strategies

This example focuses on the second of five small group reading sessions planned by Eleanor, a class teacher of 7 year olds, based on *Black Queen* by Michael Morpurgo. She uses reciprocal teaching for group reading focused on developing comprehension and the school devotes 25 minutes every day to this activity.

Before the session Eleanor planned three questions:

*What reasons did Mrs Blume give for not letting Billy into her back yard?*  
(looking)

*Why is the woman next door called the Black Queen by everybody?* (clue)

*How would you have planned to find the cat if it was yours? What might have happened in the story if Billy had done that?* (thinking)

Eleanor will use these questions and the text for at least three of the groups in her class. She knows that she can meet the needs of the groups by shaping the conversation arising from the responses to the questions. Currently, with almost all her class, she is supporting their use of making connections with clues in the text; with her most experienced readers she is looking at how authors choose to use similes and the effect this has on the reader.

Eleanor also considered the vocabulary and decided that two of the words would probably need clarifying: *snooty* and *stand-offish*.

At the beginning of the session, Eleanor explained that they would be reading and discussing chapter 2. The group briefly recapped what happened in chapter 1.

**Prediction:** The children together predicted what they thought would happen in chapter 2 based on what they have been read previously. Eleanor occasionally probed by asking for reasons for their answers.

**Questioning:** Eleanor showed the group the three questions to focus their reading. This was followed by silent reading of chapter 2 by the children, without interruption. As they read, they noted any words which they would like clarified and also considered the three questions.

**Clarification:** After reading the chapter, the children were prompted to discuss the words and phrases which puzzled them. The group and Eleanor shared ideas and checked with the text to see which makes sense in the context. One or two of the children had identified common as puzzling as they did not understand that it referred to an open space, usually grass land. Eleanor gave them the definition and they checked that it made sense.

**Questioning:** The three questions were re-read and discussed, and Eleanor asked further questions which probed and challenged thinking. The children and teacher responded to each other by asking for justification, sharing their own ideas which built on what others in the group had said, or suggested alternative

ideas. Eleanor monitored the discussion carefully and asked follow-up questions to check the group's literal comprehension to start with. When answering the thinking questions, she checked that they were making connections within the text as well as beyond the text to make inferences. The goal was to ensure that the conversations led to deeper comprehension.

**Summarising:** At the end of the session the children were given some brief thinking time to recall what happened in chapter 2, encouraged to make a mental representation in their heads, and then briefly to tell each other in no more than a few sentences.

After the session the children were given an activity to complete independently which would consolidate making connections within the text, drawing on evidence and using visualisation to develop a rounded picture of one of the main characters. They were asked to Draw Mrs Blume and annotate their drawing with quotes from the chapter.

(adapted from Bearne, E. and Reedy, D. *Teaching Primary English: Subject Knowledge and Classroom Practice*. London: Routledge. pp. 205-6)

*David Reedy and Jo Tregenza on behalf of UKLA*

See also

**UKLA bookshop** [www.ukla.org/shop](http://www.ukla.org/shop)

*Building Communities of Readers*

by Teresa Cremin, Marilyn Mottram, Fiona Collins and Sacha Powell

*Making an Impact 1: Developing a Reading School*

by Rebecca Kennedy and Eve Bearne: professional development materials accompanying *Building Communities of Readers*

*Using Technology to Improve Reading and Learning*

by Bernadette Dwyer and Colin Harrison

*Teaching Comprehension through Reading and Responding to Film*

by Fiona Maine

*English Language and Literacy 3-19: Reading 3-7* by John Richmond

*English Language and Literacy 3-19: Reading 7-16* by Peter Traves

*Literature Circles: Better Talking, More Ideas* by Carole King and Jane Briggs

*Making Reading Mean* by Vivienne Smith

*Talk for Reading* by Claire Warner

See also

**UKLA website**      [www.ukla.org/resources](http://www.ukla.org/resources)

*Reading Fact Cards* and *CLPE Reading and Writing Scales*

both on: <https://ukla.org/resources/collection/professional-development>

Free resource: *Reading for Pleasure*

[https://ukla.org/downloads/Reading\\_for\\_Pleasure.pdf](https://ukla.org/downloads/Reading_for_Pleasure.pdf)

For information on OU/UKLA Reading for Pleasure groups go to:

<https://www.researchrichpedagogies.org/research/reading-for-pleasure>