



# Comprehension

That *Works*

Taking Students Beyond Ordinary Understanding  
to Deep Comprehension

Danny Brassell &  
Timothy Rasinski

Foreword by Hallie Kay Yopp

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**Authors**

Danny Brassell, Ph.D. and Timothy Rasinski, Ph.D.

Foreword by Hallie Yopp, Ph.D.



# Comprehension That Works

## Taking Students Beyond Ordinary Understanding to Deep Comprehension

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# Introduction

In this book, we describe effective reading comprehension strategies based on our experiences as teachers and observers of outstanding teachers. Our aim is to provide teachers with a body of comprehension strategies that challenge students to think about textual meanings at deep levels of understanding; the theoretical and evidence-based support for the comprehension strategies presented in the session; and rich, contextualized descriptions of the comprehension strategies in actual classroom and clinical settings with students and teachers.

Comprehension is the essential goal of reading and reading instruction. Effective comprehension instruction goes beyond literal comprehension by challenging students to make deep inferences about texts, to think critically about the material they read, and to creatively transform the texts they encounter into other forms and formats. Moreover, effective instruction in comprehension should be engaging for students and teachers. That is, instruction should be designed in ways that challenge students to think creatively and to display their creative thinking to work in ways that are engaging, authentic, and enjoyable, and in which they can take justifiable pride. Effective comprehension instruction should provide teachers with tools for differentiating instruction for all students, whether they are gifted, struggling, or English language learners.

In each chapter of this book, we share instructional comprehension strategies that satisfy the instructional needs and principles identified in the previous paragraph—strategies that are effective and go beyond the ordinary. These strategies are based on solid research and theory in comprehension processing, as well as our own classroom and reading clinic experience with students and teachers.

In [Chapter 1](#), we define reading comprehension, examine its importance, and present an overview of the increasing body of research that has formed over the past 30 years in favor of reading comprehension support. [Chapter 2](#) offers ways to get students excited about reading. We discuss the characteristics of proficient readers in [Chapter 3](#). In [Chapter 4](#), we examine how to assess students' reading comprehension (e.g., prior knowledge of various texts, topics, and strategies). In [Chapter 5](#), we examine ways that teachers can differentiate comprehension instruction to meet the needs of all students. [Chapter 6](#) reviews a number of other strategies teachers may use to build their students' comprehension skills. Finally, [Chapters 7–9](#) examine a variety of strategies teachers may use to strengthen students' comprehension of texts before, during, and after reading. *You're the Expert* is a feature that invites you to think about your beliefs and practices regarding teaching reading. *At Your Fingertips* provides suggestions for teaching resources and professional reflection, as well as short summaries of research relevant to comprehension instruction.

Some of the strategies in this book will be familiar to teachers. Other strategies in this book may seem a bit different from what teachers have used or encountered in the past. These lesser-known comprehension strategies may tap into the interests and needs of students who may not otherwise find reading easy or fulfilling. These are strategies that have been used with students at the Reading and Writing Center at Kent State University

and have been found to be effective and engaging. Classroom teachers have also used these strategies with students and have found them valuable in drawing students' attention to the meaning of what they read. What is offered in this volume expands the notion of what counts as effective comprehension instruction. Comprehension instruction can be much more than simply asking students questions at the end of a reading or having them respond to what they have read by writing a summary or completing an activity sheet. Comprehension instruction can and should be effective, but it should also be engaging and creative, and tap into the various talents and gifts of all students.

# What Is Reading? What Is Reading Comprehension?

*On a bright fall morning on the campus of Kent State University in Ohio, student clinicians in the university's Reading and Writing Center are gearing up to assess and diagnose the reading of several children referred to the center because of reading difficulties experienced in school and at home. One of the diagnostic teams is assigned Marcus, a bright-eyed third grader, who is more than pleased to have the undivided attention of the three adults who have been assigned to work with him. After meeting Marcus and asking him to share with them his interests in and attitudes about reading, the clinicians have Marcus read orally some passages from an informal reading inventory.*

*Marcus is eager to do so. However, before beginning to read the first passage, he asks the clinicians an interesting question: "Should I read the stories as fast as I can?" The clinicians are momentarily taken aback but recover quickly to remind him to read in his best voice in order to understand what he reads. They remind him that they will be asking him to retell what he has read after reading each passage.*

*Despite the reminder, Marcus reads the first passage quickly and with remarkable accuracy—only one word-recognition error. However, he pays little attention to punctuation and demonstrates very little expression in his oral reading. Moreover, when he is asked to retell what he has just read, he struggles to provide even a few accurate memories of the passage. Still, he ends this first reading with a smile on his face; clearly he feels that he has impressed the clinicians with his reading.*

*Natalia, another third grader from a different school in the same town, arrives at the Reading and Writing Center a few minutes later with her parents. Although she is a bit more reticent than Marcus, she also eases into the morning of reading with another set of clinicians assigned to assess and diagnose her reading. Natalia is asked to read orally some graded passages from an informal reading inventory. Natalia asks no questions before beginning to read. Her reading is slow and labored, and she makes several errors in recognizing words; but she perseveres and makes it to the end of the first passage.*

*When asked to retell what she has read, Natalia's demeanor changes from an intense reader focused on making it through the text to a child who is able to quickly provide a detailed recollection of nearly every event from the passage she has just read. Moreover, in her retelling, she notes how she has had some of the same experiences in her own life that were described in the reading. She even noted how she felt during those experiences.*

*The clinical teams continued to work with Marcus and Natalia throughout the morning and were able to identify their strengths and difficulties in order to provide parents and teachers with recommendations for helping the children overcome those difficulties. Both children left the reading center that morning tired, but with smiles on their faces.*

## You're the Expert

Both Marcus and Natalia struggle with reading, yet they each manifest different behaviors while reading and retelling what they have read. How do you think Marcus views reading? How would he define reading? What do you think Natalia thinks about *reading*? Who is the better reader? Why do you think so?

## At Your Fingertips

Reading is a multidimensional process that involves the eyes, the ears, the mouth, and most importantly, the brain. What counts for you as reading? Consider the following tasks:

1. How would you describe or define *reading* to a child or person who doesn't know how to read? What are the most essential elements of reading?
2. Find two children and ask them how they would describe or define *reading* to someone who doesn't read.

Consider your response and the responses of the children. What are the essential elements of reading? Do the responses vary at all? What do these responses tell you about how reading is viewed by people?

To most reading specialists, the one essential element involved in reading is making meaning. In other words, turning those written squiggles on a page into meaningful thoughts, not just those expressed by the author, but also those that are triggered in the reader as he or she reads. These thoughts may even go beyond the content expressed in the text itself. Reading is the creation of meaning from the printed page. Although it may involve the sounding out of words, accessing the meaning of words, reading the text with appropriate fluency, and providing expression, these are all sideshows to the main event—making meaning.

## Reading and Reading Comprehension

At its heart, *reading* refers to the ability to comprehend or make meaning from written text. A dictionary definition of the word *read* states that it is the ability to examine and comprehend the meaning of written words. Comprehension, then, is at the heart of any conventional definition of reading.

Comprehension and reading comprehension, however, are concepts that, to a certain degree, defy specific definition. What does it mean to *comprehend*? Some might say comprehension is the act of understanding. That brings up the question: what is understanding? The dictionary says that *comprehension* is the ability to know or grasp ideas with the mind. Indeed, the term *comprehend* is derived from the Latin *prehendere* which means “to grasp.” Again, however, these words that are used to define the term *comprehension* are as vague as the term *comprehension* itself. How does one know when an idea is fully grasped? How does one demonstrate full comprehension or knowledge of ideas? Does a mere retelling of what one reads, as is done in some tests of reading comprehension, demonstrate adequate comprehension? The notion of *grasping* suggests that there is an action required of the reader in order to grasp the meaning of the text.

Reading comprehension is not a passive activity in which meaning “magically” appears once the reader reads the words in the text.

Reading and literacy scholars have created their own definitions of reading comprehension that contain a bit more precision. Reading comprehension is the construction of the meaning of a written communication through a reciprocal, holistic interchange of ideas between the interpreter and the message (Harris and Hodges 1995, 39). The presumption is that meaning resides in the intentional problem-solving and thinking processes of the interpreter. The content of meaning is influenced by that person’s prior knowledge and experience.

This definition also suggests that reading comprehension requires an action on the part of the reader. That action involves the use of the existing knowledge that the reader has on the topic of the text as well as the text itself in order to create meaning. The problem in reading comprehension is making meaning from the text. The problem is solved by the intentional action of the reader, which includes the purpose for reading as well as the ability to draw upon prior knowledge that is relevant to the text. The question now becomes, what types of actions do readers engage in that allow them to solve the problem of making meaning from the text?

## **Three-Level Taxonomy of Comprehension**

Thomas Barrett has suggested the following three types of action with his three-level taxonomy of reading comprehension (Clymer 1968).

**Literal Comprehension:** Literal comprehension, the lowest of the three levels, requires a reader to be able to retell or recall the facts or information presented in a text. Names of characters and details of the setting are examples of literal comprehension. The information required for literal comprehension comes largely from the text itself. Recall comprehension can easily be evaluated. In responding to a literal question, the reader either can recall the information from the text or he or she cannot.

**Inferential Comprehension:** Inferential comprehension, the next level, refers to the ability of a reader to take in information that is inferred or implied within a text. If a text indicates that a character is carrying an umbrella while walking down a street on a cloudy day, you can infer that the character is expecting rain. Inferential comprehension is more sophisticated than literal comprehension because it requires the orchestration and manipulation of information from the text as well as information that resides within the readers—their background knowledge.

**Critical Comprehension:** Critical or evaluative comprehension, the third and highest level in the taxonomy, involves making critical judgments about the information presented in the text. Were the characters reputable and honest in their actions? Did the selection offer the reader new information, new insights, or added enjoyment? Were the characters authentic? Was the literary quality of the text high? Answers to such questions require a high level of interaction between information from the text, the reader, perhaps other people with whom the reader has interacted, or even other texts the reader has read. Moreover, in-depth analysis and critical thinking are necessary to make informed judgments and evaluations. Because responses to inferential and critical-level questions

are highly dependent on the reader's own background, interest, and disposition, determining a reader's level and the quality of a reader's inferential and critical comprehension is not easy.

All three levels of comprehension are important and need to be fostered. However, it has generally been the case that inferential and critical comprehension are not sufficiently addressed in many classrooms and reading programs. These levels are not easily evaluated and do not lend themselves to the "teacher asks and student answers" type of comprehension discussions that follow many reading lessons. Nevertheless, a focus on inferential and critical comprehension is appropriate, and nurtures the high-level thinking that one would expect to find in high-performing classrooms.

## **Transformational Model of Comprehension**

Reading comprehension is the ability to take information from written text and do something with it in a way that demonstrates knowledge or understanding of that information. Comprehension occurs when a reader is able to act on, respond to, or transform the information that is presented in written text in ways that demonstrate understanding. The following examples illustrate how readers can show they understand what they read.

When a reader is able to engage in an intelligent discussion about a text with others, the reader is demonstrating comprehension of the passage. When a reader is able to relate text to real events, the reader is demonstrating comprehension. When a reader is able to apply information from a text to a new situation, such as fixing an automobile, the reader is demonstrating comprehension. When a reader is able to transform a narrative story into a poem, play, newspaper article, critical review, insightful essay, entertaining advertisement, visual image, musical score, or dance movement, the reader is demonstrating a sophisticated level of understanding of text.

Comprehension demands that readers do something with a text beyond simple verbatim retelling of the information from the text itself. A reader needs to take the information from the text and transform it in some way, using his or her own thought processes in order to comprehend and demonstrate comprehension of what he or she has read. This is called the transformational model of reading comprehension. The activities we describe in this book are based on this model and are designed to engage students in purposeful and meaningful reading experiences.

## **A Processing Definition of Reading**

Another approach to defining reading comes from the work of the National Reading Panel (NRP). The NRP is a group of literacy experts commissioned by the federal government in the 1990s to examine current and past research on literacy acquisition and identify factors associated with success in learning to read. The panel identified five factors that could be thought of as essential components of reading and learning to read (National Reading Panel 2000):

**Factor 1:** Phonemic awareness refers to the ability to conceptualize, think about, and manipulate the sounds of language.

**Factor 2:** Phonics or decoding refers to the ability to translate the written symbols used in reading (i.e., letters) into sounds and orally produced words.

**Factor 3:** Vocabulary is the ability of readers to grasp the meaning of individual words and phrases used in written texts.

**Factor 4:** Fluency refers to two distinct competencies. First, fluency is the ability to process the printed text so automatically and effortlessly that a reader can devote a maximal amount of his or her attention to constructing the meaning of the author's message. The second aspect of fluency is the ability to read a text orally, with expression that reflects the syntactic and semantic nature of the written text.

The first four of these components do not directly deal with meaning, but they are necessary conditions that allow readers to focus on comprehension. So, while these four components are not equal to comprehension, a proficiency in these areas most certainly assists students with the comprehension of text.

**Factor 5:** The fifth component identified by the NRP is comprehension. The panel identified seven types of comprehension instruction, or comprehension processes, that enable readers to grasp or make meaning from written text. All seven are supported by scientific evidence that has demonstrated that when teachers use these processes or teach them to students, students are more likely to comprehend or make meaning from what they read. These comprehension processes correspond well with the actions required of a reader to respond to and/or transform texts, which were mentioned earlier in this chapter. The comprehension processes identified by the panel include:

- **Graphic and semantic organizers**—The use of graphic representations of written material can aid readers in making meaning.
- **Question answering**—Readers are more likely to understand what they read when they are asked questions about the reading by their teacher and receive immediate feedback about their answers.
- **Question generation**—Readers are more likely to understand what they read when they ask questions of themselves about various aspects of their reading before and during the reading itself.
- **Text structure**—Helping readers understand the underlying organization or structure of a written text has been found to aid them in understanding and recalling the information from the passage.
- **Summarization**—Readers are better able to understand what they read when they engage in distilling, integrating, and generalizing the information from a passage into its key ideas in the form of a brief summary.
- **Cooperative learning**—Students are more likely to make meaning from a text when they engage in the process of making meaning with other students.
- **Comprehension monitoring**—Successful comprehenders monitor or are aware of their own comprehension and make strategic decisions to employ certain strategies or processes, depending on how successful they feel they are in making meaning from their reading.

Research exists that supports the use of these strategies and processes to improve reading comprehension. A common thread in each of these strategies is that they actively engage the reader in making and monitoring meaning from the text. Readers must get the mental gears in their heads turning to make comprehension happen. These strategies require readers to make their mental gears turn.

Although these strategies have been shown to be effective, their identification by the National Reading Panel does not imply that these are the only strategies that are useful in teaching reading comprehension. Any comprehension strategy that requires students to engage in thoughtful, deliberative discussion about the text they are reading will foster understanding.

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