

Workshop 3

Building Comprehension

"I don't think there's any goal we have for students that's greater than the goal of having them be able to make meaning from, and critically evaluate, the text that they're going to experience and encounter throughout their lives."

Nell Duke
Associate Professor of Education
Michigan State University

How can teachers advance students' comprehension before, during, and after reading? In this session, literacy expert Nell Duke defines comprehension and reviews the multiple strategies proficient readers use. You will learn how to use explicit instruction that promotes active, thoughtful learning.

Learning Goals

At the end of this session, you will better understand how to:

- identify the components of effective reading comprehension
- support students' comprehension before, during, and after reading
- provide opportunities for reading and responding to text
- encourage critical and thoughtful response to text

Materials Needed

- the Components of Comprehension Instruction Chart found at the end of this chapter
- the Examine the Literature Response Chart found at the end of this chapter
- articles: "Effective Practices for Developing Reading Comprehension" and "What Every Teacher Needs to Know About Comprehension" found on the *Teaching Reading 3-5* Web site at www.learner.org/channel/workshops/teachreading35
- a journal or notebook

Facilitator: You may want to have several copies of charts and articles available for participants without Internet access.

Before You Watch

Session Preparation

To prepare for this workshop session, you will review the key terms, identify the strategies that you already use, and then read two articles on effective comprehension instruction.

Facilitator: Have participants complete these activities before arriving for the session.

Key Terms

- Authentic literacy
- Background knowledge
- Comprehension strategies
- Informational text
- IRE (Initiation-Response-Evaluation)
- Narrative text

Definitions for these terms can be found in the Glossary in the Appendix.



Notebook

What Do You Do?

To complete this activity, use the Components of Comprehension Instruction Chart found at the end of this chapter.

Consider some of the practices that effective teachers use to support comprehension. For example, they teach key vocabulary and build background knowledge. They help students establish a purpose for reading, teach text structure, and provide explicit instruction in strategies that students can use when reading on their own. They also provide many opportunities for students to read and respond to texts.

Now think about the strategies you use to teach comprehension as you answer the following questions:

1. What comprehension skills or strategies do you emphasize?
2. What teaching strategies or practices do you use to teach comprehension? What materials do you use?
3. What are some specific activities you use to engage students in reading and responding to the text?
4. What challenges do you face in your instruction?
5. What challenges do your students face in comprehending texts?
6. What goals do you have? (Complete this section after the session as part of your Literacy Practices Portfolio.)

Use the Components of Comprehension Instruction Chart to document your answers and, if you are taking this workshop for credit, save the chart for your Literacy Practices Portfolio.



Assignment

Examine the Literature

To complete this activity, use the Examine the Literature Response Chart found at the end of this chapter.

Read each article listed below, recording your ideas on the chart during and after reading. When you have finished, save your chart to submit as an assignment.

Before You Watch, cont'd.

These articles can be found as downloadable PDFs on the *Teaching Reading 3-5* Web site at www.learner.org/channel/workshops/teachreading35.

Effective Practices for Developing Reading Comprehension

This article examines how teachers can make a difference by providing good comprehension instruction and ample amounts of time for students to read, write, and discuss what they've read.

Duke, N. K., and P. D. Pearson. "Effective Practices for Developing Reading Comprehension." In *What Research Has to Say About Reading Instruction*, edited by A. E. Farstrup and S. J. Samuels, 205-242. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2002.

What Every Teacher Needs to Know About Comprehension

In this article, Laura Pardo explains how teachers can support comprehension by scaffolding the reader, the text, the context, and the transaction that occurs while reading.

Pardo, L. S. "What Every Teacher Needs to Know About Comprehension." *The Reading Teacher* 58, no. 3 (Nov. 2004): 272-280.

Analyze the Video

Facilitator: When the workshop session begins, you may want to spend a few minutes discussing the key terms, participants' prior knowledge, and the readings.

Video Summary

In this video, Professor Nell Duke defines what good readers do as they process text and what teachers can do to improve students' reading comprehension. You will also see classroom examples that illustrate the strategies and research Professor Duke describes. As you watch the video, consider the following questions:

- What do good readers do?
- What can teachers do to improve comprehension?
- What can teachers do to help struggling readers?

Analyze the Video, cont'd.



Watch the Video

Watch the video, “Building Comprehension,” taking notes as you watch. After you watch, jot down your answers to the questions below. If you prefer to watch the video in segments, pause the video when you see the next chapter heading.

Video Segment 1: What Do Good Readers Do? (approximate times: 00:00-08:00): If you are watching the video in segments, you will find this image at the beginning of the video.

In this segment, Professor Duke defines comprehension and describes the research findings on what good readers do as they read.

- How do the classroom clips illustrate Professor Duke’s definition of comprehension?
- Based on Professor Duke’s suggestions, how can you promote active learning through your instruction?
- How can you help your struggling readers use comprehension strategies as they read?



Video Segment 2: What Can Teachers Do To Improve Students’ Comprehension? (approximate times: 08:00-25:00): If you are watching the video in segments, you will find this image approximately eight minutes into the video.

In this video segment, Professor Duke emphasizes the importance of explicit instruction for improving students’ comprehension. These instructional practices should focus on factors related to effective comprehension: vocabulary, background knowledge, text structure, and authentic opportunities to read and respond to text.

- How can you build background knowledge before reading?
- How and when can you teach vocabulary? How do you choose which words to teach?
- What changes might you make?
- How can you teach comprehension strategies across the curriculum?
- How can you promote meaningful conversations about text among your students?



Video Segment 3: What Can Teachers Do To Help Struggling Readers? (approximate times: 25:00-end): If you are watching the video in segments, you will find this image approximately 25 minutes into the video.

In the last video segment, Professor Duke discusses the difficulties struggling readers often have in actively monitoring their comprehension.

- What strategies can you use to help students when they don’t understand?
- What strategies can you teach your students to use when comprehension breaks down?



Extend Your Knowledge

Examine the Topic

Vocabulary development is an important factor in reading comprehension. Read the following three statements by Nell Duke, Jennifer Soalt, and Laura Pardo. Consider how these ideas on vocabulary instruction relate to the classrooms in the video, as well as to your own instructional practices.

Vocabulary and comprehension go hand in hand. Our research shows that a higher vocabulary predicts or suggests that a student will comprehend at a higher level. This connection is not just an accident. Really, it is causal. We know that if you work to improve students' vocabulary, it actually improves their comprehension.

Nell Duke

Vocabulary, like background knowledge, affects comprehension. However, research has shown that in order for vocabulary instruction to have an effect on comprehension, students need to explore a new word in a variety of contexts. Discussing the meaning of the same word in this way enables students to formulate a nuanced, recallable understanding of the word's meaning. Unfortunately, much vocabulary instruction aimed at improving comprehension is ineffective because it examines the word being taught only in the context of a single text.

Units of study that contain fictional and informational texts on the same topic help teachers avoid that instructional pitfall by enabling students to explore new vocabulary in multiple contexts: A new word first encountered in an informational text may be encountered again in a related informational or a fictional text on the same topic. Moreover, informational and fictional texts on the same topic often use synonymous or even identical words to convey slightly different shades of meaning, further enhancing the depth of students' vocabulary by exposing them to the different facets of a particular word or group of words.

Excerpted from Soalt, J. "Bringing Together Fictional and Informational Texts to Improve Comprehension." *The Reading Teacher* 58, no. 7 (April 2005): 680-681.

If there are too many words that a reader does not know, he or she will have to spend too much mental energy figuring out the unknown word(s) and will not be able to understand the passage as a whole. Teachers help students learn important vocabulary words prior to reading difficult or unfamiliar texts. When teaching vocabulary words, teachers make sure that the selected words are necessary for making meaning with the text students will be reading and that they help students connect the new words to something they already know. Simply using the word lists supplied in textbooks does not necessarily accomplish this task. Many teachers consider the backgrounds and knowledge levels of their students and the text the students will be engaging in and then select a small number of words or ideas that are important for understanding the text. Once teachers have decided on the appropriate vocabulary words to use, students must actively engage with the words—use them in written and spoken language—in order for the words to become a part of the students' reading and writing vocabularies. For example, asking students to create graphic organizers that show relationships among new words and common and known words helps them assimilate new vocabulary. Asking students to look up long lists of unrelated, unknown words is unlikely to help students access the text more appropriately or to increase personal vocabularies.

Excerpted from Pardo, L. S. "What Every Teacher Needs to Know About Comprehension." *The Reading Teacher* 58, no. 3 (Nov. 2004): 274.

Extend Your Knowledge, cont'd.



Notebook

Now write your answers to the following questions:

- What are the important ideas about vocabulary instruction highlighted in all three statements?
- What are the strategies readers use to determine unfamiliar word meanings?
- What evidence of vocabulary learning did you see in the classroom clips? What strategies were the students using?
- Think about your vocabulary instruction.
 - How will you provide multiple exposures to the same word?
 - How will you ensure that students are actively involved with the word?
 - What are your challenges in teaching vocabulary?



Interactive Activity

The House

**Go to the *Teaching Reading 3-5* Web site at
www.learner.org/channel/workshops/teachreading35**

Setting specific purposes before reading helps readers understand what is important to identify and remember during and after reading. Through this activity, you will understand the importance of setting purposes for reading in order to improve comprehension. You will read a passage about a house three times, each time highlighting with different purposes in mind.

Tips for New Teachers



Tip

Comprehension Strategies

Good comprehension strategies are important, but they don't happen after one lesson or even a few good lessons. If you're a new teacher, or teaching a new group of students, consider the following tips to get started:

- Use picture books to model using comprehension strategies.
- Initially have students read easy text to practice a new comprehension strategy.
- Create with your students a wall chart defining each strategy as you teach it.
- Remember to tell students what the strategy is, how to use it, and when to use it.
- Teach and apply strategies across the curriculum.
- When conferring with a student during reading, note or ask the student what strategies are being used.
- In planning for teaching a book, decide which comprehension strategies and themes you will develop throughout the book.
- Be sure your plans include activities to develop comprehension before students begin to read. Determine and plan instruction for concepts, background knowledge, and vocabulary critical to understanding the selection.
- Instead of asking students to answer a series of comprehension questions after reading, develop one open-ended question that will promote meaningful oral and/or written response.

Put It Into Practice

Choose Activities

In this section, you will build on what you have learned and develop strategies you can use in your own classroom. The following activities are designed to help you develop instructional practices for developing students' comprehension. Choose one or both of the activities from the list below.

Activity 1: Develop a Home Reading Program

In this activity, you will develop a home reading program to encourage reading at home and to support students' reading skills.

Activity 2: Foster Authentic Reading and Writing

In this activity, you will identify and develop authentic reading and writing activities that support comprehension and active learning.



1. Develop a Home Reading Program

Reading at home is an essential component of your reading program. It provides students with extended practice and engagement in comprehending texts they can read and want to read. In this activity, you will develop a home reading program to support students' reading development and foster a positive home/school connection. When you have finished, save your written work to submit as an assignment.

To do this, you will need to:

1. Prepare:
 - Decide on an appropriate amount of time for daily or weekly home reading.
 - Discuss books found in the classroom and school library that students may be interested in reading.
 - Teach a lesson on how to choose a "just right" book for independent, home reading.
2. Inform:
 - Write a letter to parents and students explaining the Home Reading Program. Include in the letter the value of home reading, expectations for time, and procedures for recording/monitoring reading.
 - Create a Home Reading Log for students to record the amount of time they read each day and to write a response to their reading two to three times per week. You may want to include a place for parents to indicate they were aware of and/or involved in their child's reading. Include this chart with the parent/student letter.
3. Share:
 - Set aside time each day to confer with students about their home reading.
 - Set aside time each week for book sharing. Students should sign up to share a book they are reading or have completed.
 - Design a form for students to record favorite books ("Must Reads"), and post it in a designated area of the classroom. The form should include the name of the book, the author, and the reason why others should read it.

Put It Into Practice, cont'd.



Assignment

2. Foster Authentic Reading and Writing

Authentic learning is based on students' use of reading and writing for purposes other than satisfying the teacher's assignments. Authentic tasks are those that students might do even if they are not trying to improve their reading or writing. In this activity, you will develop a list of authentic reading and writing activities that support comprehension and active learning. When you have finished, save your written work to submit as an assignment.

Think about five topics, themes, and/or books you will be teaching this year. What reading and writing activities will promote successful learning of these topics/themes? Now make a list of at least two authentic activities/experiences for each topic or theme. For example, you may want to include:

- writing a letter to the author of a book, asking for clarification of a question that arose during reading
- reading books or other texts in order to understand concepts or develop background knowledge for a field trip
- reading information in texts or on the Internet to help answer a specific question discussed in class
- researching a specific aspect of a book in order to gain insight into the story or characters (for example, *Bud, Not Buddy* takes place during the Great Depression; students may want to research life during that time to understand the challenges the characters faced in the story)
- preparing a list of questions for an upcoming interview with a relative or citizen of the community, highlighting the important information desired

Reflect on Your Learning



Assignment

What Did You Learn?

Think about what you have learned about comprehension instruction from Professor Duke's comments and the classroom examples. Write a summary of what you have learned. Use the questions below to guide your thinking. When you have finished, save your written work to submit as an assignment and, if you are taking this workshop for credit, include it in your Literacy Practices Portfolio.

- Which ideas from the video struck you as most relevant to your teaching of comprehension?
- What questions from your chart were answered after watching the video?
- What classroom practices might you change or modify?
- What new instructional practices will you implement in your classroom?
- How will you use the ideas presented in this video to improve the comprehension of your struggling readers?



Assignment

Create a Literacy Practices Portfolio

Continue to build your portfolio of instructional practices. Your portfolio for this workshop session will include the following:

- current practices in place in your classroom
- changes you would like to make
- a description of one change you have implemented
- evidence of student learning

1. Current practices

Include the Components of Comprehension Instruction Chart that you started in What Do You Do? You will complete it, below.

2. Changes you would like to make

Include your written response from What Did You Learn? Then, return to the Components of Comprehension Instruction Chart. Complete column 4, noting any changes you would like to make in your instructional practices for each of the components. You may want to change or add more than one instructional practice to each component.

Reflect on Your Learning, cont'd.

3. One change you have implemented

a. Make a change

Choose one instructional change that you described in What Did You Learn? to implement now. What is your thinking behind making this change? Describe the change in detail and explain how it will be implemented (e.g., an instructional practice, a lesson plan, a plan for modeling a strategy, etc.). What are the expected outcomes for student learning?

b. Reflect on the change

Write a brief reflection about what worked when you implemented this change and what you will change the next time you teach this lesson. (If you are taking this workshop during the summer, describe the learning goals and expected outcomes of this change.)

4. Evidence of student learning

Include evidence demonstrating student learning as a result of the change. Explain how students exhibited better comprehension through your instruction. Listed below are possible pieces of evidence:

- a journal entry
- a student reflection
- a student response to reading
- notes from a teacher-student reading conference
- notes from a student think-aloud
- observational notes from a book discussion
- a videotape of a book discussion
- an audiotape of a discussion group
- evidence of student engagement through an authentic activity

Assignments

If you are taking this workshop for graduate credit, submit the following assignments for Workshop 3: Building Comprehension:

1. Examine the Literature

Read two articles on comprehension and complete the Examine the Literature Response Chart.

2. Develop a Home Reading Program

Develop a home reading program to encourage reading at home and to support students' reading skills.

3. Foster Authentic Reading and Writing

Identify and develop authentic reading and writing activities that support comprehension and active learning.

4. What Did You Learn?

Write a summary of the ideas and strategies you explored in this session.

5. Create a Literacy Practices Portfolio

If you are taking this workshop for credit, you will continue constructing your portfolio of instructional practices.

Related Resources

Print Resources

Barton, J., and D. M. Sawyer. "Our Students Are Ready for This: Comprehension Instruction in the Elementary School." *The Reading Teacher* 57, no. 7 (Dec. 2003/Jan. 2004): 334-347.

Block, C. C., and M. Pressley. *Comprehension Instruction: Research-Based Best Practices*. New York: Guilford Press, 2002.

Cazden, C. *Classroom Discourse: The Language of Teaching and Learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1988.

Clark, K. F., and M. F. Graves. "Scaffolding Students' Comprehension of Text." *The Reading Teacher* 58, no. 6 (March 2005): 570-580.

Harvey, S. *Strategies That Work*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse, 2000.

Hoyt, L. *Spotlight on Comprehension: Building a Literacy of Thoughtfulness*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005.

Pardo, L. S. "What Every Teacher Needs to Know About Comprehension." *The Reading Teacher* 58, no. 3 (Nov. 2004): 272-280.

Pressley, M. "Metacognition and Self-Regulated Comprehension." In *What Research Has to Say About Reading Instruction*, edited by A. E. Farstrup and S. J. Samuels, 291-309. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2003.

Web Resources

The Literacy Web

<http://www.literacy.uconn.edu/>

This site, from the University of Connecticut, provides resources on how the Internet can assist teachers in understanding and using best practices in literacy instruction.

Read, Write, Think

www.readwritethink.org

This site, sponsored by the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), includes information and lesson plans for research-based literacy instruction in comprehension and response to reading.

ReadingLady

<http://www.readinglady.com>

This site provides lessons, graphic organizers, and instructional support in teaching the literacy strategies of proficient readers.

Teaching Reading 3-5

Building Comprehension > Before You Watch

Components of Comprehension Instruction Chart

Components	Strategies and Materials	Challenges and Questions	Goals/Changes in Instructional Practices
Building Background Knowledge			
Vocabulary			
Setting Reading Objectives			
Oral and Written Response			

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Teaching Reading 3-5

Building Comprehension > Before You Watch

Examine the Literature Response Chart

Title	Big Ideas	Notes and Questions
1.		
2.		