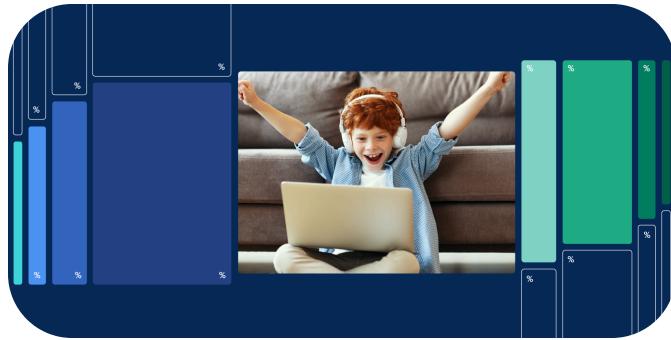




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# 8 Reading Comprehension Strategies to Boost Understanding and Retention



Reading comprehension strategies to boost understanding and retention are perhaps the most crucial skills for students to learn. However, when these strategies do not align with decoding ability, students may miss out on the benefits (and joys) of reading.

Put simply, reading comprehension is the ability to take the lines and squiggles on a page and gain meaning from them. Students may be able to decode, or translate the letters into sounds and words, but that doesn't mean they *understand* what they're reading. Reading comprehension is that second component of the reading process. Without it, reading seems

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pointless for students, but with comprehension, reading can open doors to entirely new worlds.

The good news? Like most things, reading comprehension strategies can be learned and developed. Sometimes, students just need an extra boost.

## First, master decoding.

## Then, reading comprehension.

Before a student can comprehend a text, they must be able to decode it — or translate the lines and squiggles on the page into sounds and words. This is what most reading instruction in the early grades focuses on, often through phonics or sight reading methods.

The texts students read at these levels don't contain much in terms of subject matter, because they're written to develop students' decoding abilities. *The cat sat on the hat* is simple both phonetically and in terms of comprehension. Because of this, weak reading comprehension isn't often discovered until the later grades, when decoding has generally been mastered and students are introduced to more complicated texts.

Should teachers, then, introduce reading comprehension strategies to the lower grades? Maybe not.

According to Daniel T. Willingham in [an article](#) for the American Federation of Teachers, the evidence for reading strategy effectiveness "is weak for students in the third grade or earlier...Strategies require attention and space in working memory. Students who are still learning to decode fluently do not have

enough working memory space available to implement strategies.”

However, reading comprehension strategy instruction can be helpful for students in higher grades who can now decode automatically — and for the younger grades, educators would do well to emphasize *listening* comprehension skills.

## **Listening & reading comprehension: Similarities and differences**

It should be no surprise good listening comprehension and good reading comprehension are connected. A student with good listening comprehension is not only engaged, but they also *understand* what they’re told. They have the necessary vocabulary and background knowledge to hear what someone is saying, read between the lines as necessary, and comprehend what the person means.

These skills all overlap with what’s needed for good reading comprehension, so if educators help their students develop good listening comprehension, it’s likely those students will go on to have stronger reading comprehension.

But there’s still a key difference between listening and reading that can influence comprehension.

In listening, the speaker is available to provide clarification — and may even be paying attention to whether or not the listener is understanding. In reading, all the reader has to

work with is what's on the page. If they don't understand something, they have to identify for themselves what doesn't make sense and either use context clues, a dictionary, their existing knowledge, or some other resource to try to make sense of what they've read. This process is called "comprehension monitoring," and while it's a key skill for improving comprehension, it requires a level of awareness not all students have on day one.

So how can you help your students improve their reading (and listening) comprehension?

## Strategies for improving reading comprehension

We'll break these reading comprehension strategies down by *where* in the reading process they offer the most benefit, but feel free to be creative in introducing them to your students. The timeline categories below are meant to be helpful, not restrictive.

### Before reading

Before embarking on a new text, have your students do one or more of the following — and be sure to tell them *why* you're having them do these exercises. Telling them "this is to help you get more out of what you're reading" can help them realize these strategies are helpful for other reading assignments as well.

- 1. Set a goal:** Why are you reading this? What are you hoping to find out or learn? The answers to these questions will vary depending on if you're reading a story or an explanatory text. You may be reading in order to find out how Lancelot slays the dragon (or if he will) — or you may be

reading to find out if starfish are the only sea creature that regrows its limbs.

**2. Make predictions:** What are we expecting the text to be about (based on the title)? Once you've started reading, what do you think will happen next? How did your predictions line up with what you actually read? This exercise starts off as a "before reading" strategy and then becomes a "while" and "after reading" exercise that encourages readers to pay attention to the text and see if their predictions matched up, or if they should adjust their expectations based on what they've read so far. This strategy lends well to gamification, with groups of students making collaborative predictions and winning prizes or honors based on how their predictions pan out.

**3. Activate prior knowledge:** This is done subconsciously in each of the previous strategies, but you can also have students engage what they already know intentionally. If everyone knows what the book or passage is about (sea creatures, for example), you could ask the class what else they know on the topic. Doing this before they start reading can help them find connections between what they already know and what the text says, which increases comprehension and retention while also building excitement for the learning process.

## While reading

The more proficient students are at reading, the more their minds can do while they're ingesting a text. These strategies can help them tune into what they're reading *while*

they're reading so they don't finish the passage and have no idea what they just read.

**1. Visualize what you're reading:** This may happen naturally when reading stories, but it's also a helpful strategy for explanatory texts. Visualization can make ideas from the text more vivid and memorable.

**2. Ask questions:** What's interesting about what you're reading? What's confusing? How does this connect to something else you've read or learned? Encourage your students to keep questions like these in mind — and come up with questions of their own — while they're reading. You can also encourage them to write down what they notice when asking these questions of the text. If something doesn't make sense, they can make a note of that and ask you about it at the appropriate time. Or they can see if the rest of the text clarifies what they didn't understand.

**3. Monitor comprehension:** The question method above can help students learn to monitor comprehension in a more active way, but monitoring comprehension doesn't need to involve specific questions. For more advanced students, it's simply ongoing awareness of whether or not they understand what they're reading — and the ability to identify what confused them. Encourage your students to pause when they get confused and go back, if necessary, to reread and look for clues in order to improve their understanding. If they've read the entire passage through and are still struggling, they can also ask for assistance.

## After reading

Often, reading tests require students to answer questions *after* they've finished reading a passage. Comprehension isn't the only skill under scrutiny — there's also retention. These strategies, combined with those described above, can help students see their comprehension and retention in action.

**1. Sum it up:** Describe what you read in your own words. Whether applied to a story or explanatory passage, this is a great practice to help students sharpen their writing skills while also demonstrating their reading comprehension. Putting things in their own words means they can't just quote verbatim what they read — they have to demonstrate an understanding of the meaning behind the words on the page.

**2. Map it out:** Use a graphic organizer or another tool to have students retell what they've learned. This could be a story arc chart where students write or draw what happened in the story they just read. You could also have students bring what they read to life with group re-enactments that engage them in reciprocal teaching while also demonstrating what they've learned.

Many of these strategies can be implemented for non-readers, as well as for readers, whether in class storytime or a typical instruction session. Yes, they're helpful for reading comprehension, but they're also helpful for listening comprehension and, more simply, for learning.

Engaged well, these strategies can make learning more interesting and exciting to

students — and can equip them for the rest of their educational careers.

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