



## Teach students how to use reading comprehension strategies



*Good readers use a variety of strategies for thinking and analyzing text, so it is important to teach beginning readers strategies for constructing meaning from text. Comprehension strategies help readers build understanding, overcome difficulties in comprehending a text, and compensate for weak or imperfect knowledge related to the text. These strategies can be taught one by one or in combination, as both approaches have been shown to improve reading comprehension. Teachers should choose the approach they are most comfortable with in the classroom.*

*Teachers should also gradually release responsibility to help students learn to use comprehension strategies independently. Yet teachers should keep in mind that students will differ in the extent of modeling or support they need in order to use strategies effectively.*



### How to carry out the recommendation

1. Teach students how to use several research-based reading comprehension strategies.
2. Teach reading comprehension strategies individually or in combination.
3. Teach reading comprehension strategies by using a gradual release of responsibility.

### Potential roadblocks

1. A multiple-strategy approach is more elaborate than a single-strategy approach.
2. The school reading assessment emphasizes comprehension skills (e.g., understanding the main idea, drawing conclusions), not strategies.
3. Students bring to the classroom a wide range of abilities in reading and reading comprehension, so adapting strategy instruction to an individual student is a challenge.

*Reference:* Shanahan, T., Callison, K., Carriere, C., Duke, N. K., Pearson, P. D., Schatschneider, C., & Torgesen, J. (2010). *Improving reading comprehension in kindergarten through 3rd grade* (NCEE 2010-4038). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance. Retrieved from <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide/14>



How to carry out the recommendation

**1. Teach students how to use several research-based reading comprehension strategies.**

The following six strategies have been shown to improve reading comprehension, especially in the primary grades. Teachers should present several of the strategies because different strategies cultivate different kinds of thinking. They should explain how the strategies can help students learn from text—as opposed to memorizing strategies—as well as how to use the strategies effectively.

Strategy	Description	Activities to Promote Strategy Practice
Activating prior knowledge / predicting	Students think about what they already know, using that knowledge and other clues to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Construct meaning from what they read.</li> <li>Make predictions about what will happen next and then continue to read to validate their predictions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pull out a main idea from the text and ask students a question that relates the idea to their experience. Ask them to predict whether a similar experience might occur in the text.</li> <li>Partway through the story, ask students to predict what will happen at the end. Ask them to explain how they developed their predictions. This activity helps student make inferences about what they are reading and look for the deeper meanings of words and passages.</li> </ul>
Questioning	Students develop questions about important ideas as they read the text, using words such as <i>where</i> or <i>why</i> , and attempt to answer these questions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Put question words (e.g., <i>where</i>, <i>why</i>) on index cards, and distribute to students. Then, have students, in small groups, develop and ask each other questions using these words.</li> </ul>
Visualizing	Students build a mental image of what is described in the text.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explain that visualizing what is described in the text can help students remember what they read.</li> <li>Have students examine several objects placed in front of them, then provide a related picture depicting a scene. Remove the objects and picture, and ask students to visualize and describe what they saw.</li> <li>Read a sentence and describe what you visualize. Choose sections from the text and ask students to do the same.</li> </ul>
Monitoring, clarifying, and fixing up	Students check whether they understand what they are reading, and when they do not understand, they reread or use strategies to help them understand.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relate strategies to traffic signs (e.g., <i>stop sign</i>—stop reading and, in your own words, restate what is happening; <i>U-turn</i>—reread parts of the text that do not make sense).</li> <li>Write each strategy on a card with its sign, and then have student pairs work to apply the strategies to text they do not understand.</li> </ul>
Drawing inferences	Students generate information important to constructing meaning that may be missing from or not explicitly stated in the text.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teach students how to look for key words that help them understand the text, and demonstrate how they can draw inferences from such words (e.g., <i>sand</i> and <i>waves</i> could indicate a beach).</li> <li>Identify key words in a sample passage, and explain what students can learn about the passage from those words.</li> </ul>
Summarizing / retelling	Students briefly describe, in speech or in writing, the main points of what they have read.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ask students to describe the text in their own words to a partner.</li> <li>If a student has trouble, ask questions such as “What comes next?” or “What else did the passage say about [subject]?”</li> </ul>

Note. Adapted from pages 12–13 of the practice guide referenced on the first page of this document.

**2. Teach reading comprehension strategies individually or in combination.**






- **Single-strategy approach:** Introduce each strategy independently and include time for practice, usually a few weeks, before the next strategy is introduced, allowing students to master a collection of strategies over time. It may be easier to begin with this approach. As additional strategies are introduced, encourage students to use all the strategies they have learned. Doing so will allow them to review and continue to build mastery of previous strategies.
- **Multiple-strategy approach:** Introduce several strategies simultaneously and allow students to practice them in combination. Multiple-strategy instruction might be more complicated initially, but it familiarizes students with using the strategies together from the very beginning, providing a more authentic strategic reading experience.



There is not enough evidence to advocate for the use of multiple-strategy instruction over single-strategy instruction, or vice versa, so teachers should choose the approach that is best for their classroom environments. Regardless of approach, the goal should be to teach students several strategies.

**3. Teach reading comprehension strategies by using a gradual release of responsibility.**

Because students may not naturally use strategies, gradually release responsibility to them. For example, first explain how to use the strategy and then give students increasing independence in practicing and applying the strategy over time.

An example of gradual release of responsibility is included in the table below. Effective instruction in reading comprehension strategies often includes some or all of these steps. While going through the steps with a class, periodically review what the purpose of a strategy is and how it improves comprehension until students can apply it independently. Cycle back through the gradual release process as the texts/topics/concepts become more difficult.

Task	Share of Responsibility	Example
Explicit description of strategy		“Predicting is making guesses about what will come next as you are reading. You should make predictions often when you read by stopping and thinking about what might come next.”
Teacher and/or student modeling		“Looking at the cover of this book, I see a picture of an owl wearing pajamas and carrying a candle. I predict this story will be about this owl, and it is going to take place at night.”
Collaborative use		“Let’s make some predictions together. When I stop reading, I want each of you to think about what might happen next . . . Okay, let’s hear what you predict and why.”
Guided practice		“Here is a list of pages from the book we are reading. After you read a page on the list, stop and write a prediction. When you finish reading the next page on the list, check whether your prediction <i>happened, will not happen, or still might happen.</i> ”
Independent use		“For now, stop every two pages as you read and evaluate the predictions you have made, then make some new ones for the next two pages.”

 Student      Teacher

*Note. Adapted from page 15 of the practice guide.*

Potential roadblocks and how to address them

Roadblock	Suggested Approach
<i>A multiple-strategy approach is more elaborate than a single-strategy approach.</i>	A multiple-strategy approach may require more professional development than a single-strategy approach. Teachers should have an opportunity to see examples of successful multiple-strategy instruction and to try it out with feedback from knowledgeable professionals, including other teachers and coaches with experience using the approach. Guides that show teachers how to implement specific multiple-strategy approaches in the classroom (e.g., professional books, manuals, and videos) are also available.
<i>The school reading assessment emphasizes comprehension skills (e.g., main idea, drawing conclusions), not strategies.</i>	Although there is nothing wrong with instruction that emphasizes certain types of questions or information in a text, the purpose of teaching reading comprehension strategies is to teach students how to think when they are reading, which in itself will improve their ability to perform well on reading assessments. It is critical for teachers to focus on the strategies described in this recommendation, as these strategies can help students learn other skills outlined in state and local content standards.
<i>Students bring to the classroom a wide range of abilities in reading and reading comprehension, so adapting strategy instruction to an individual student is a challenge.</i>	Teachers should form small groups of students with similar comprehension needs or skills, allowing them to focus targeted help on a few students at a time. For instance, instead of releasing responsibility to all students at once, teachers may model a strategy more than once for some students, or lengthen the periods of guided practice while giving feedback to students who are struggling to practice on their own. Breaking down the lesson into smaller sections or reading a smaller section of a text together can also help students who are having difficulty comprehending a particular text at the same level as other students.



*For more information on the research evidence and references to support this recommendation, or for more detailed explanation from the What Works Clearinghouse committee who developed this recommendation, please refer to the practice guide cited at the bottom of the first page of this document.*