



*text  
comprehension  
instruction*



## *text comprehension instruction*

Comprehension is the reason for reading. If readers can read the words but do not understand what they are reading, they are not really reading.

As they read, good readers are both purposeful and active.

**Good readers are purposeful.** Good readers have a purpose for reading. They may read to find out how to use a food processor; read a guidebook to gather information about national parks; read a textbook to satisfy the requirements of a course; read a magazine for entertainment; or read a classic novel to experience the pleasures of great literature.

**Good readers are active.** Good readers think actively as they read. To make sense of what they read, good readers engage in a complicated process. Using their experiences and knowledge of the world, their knowledge of vocabulary and language structure, and their knowledge of reading strategies (or plans), good readers make sense of the text and know how to get the most out of it. They know when they have problems with understanding and how to resolve these problems as they occur.

Research over 30 years has shown that instruction in comprehension can help students understand what they read, remember what they read, and communicate with others about what they read.

# What does scientifically based research tell us about effective text comprehension instruction?

The scientific research on text comprehension instruction reveals important information about what students should be taught about text comprehension and how it should be taught. The following key findings are of particular interest and value to classroom teachers.

**Text comprehension can be improved by instruction that helps readers use specific comprehension strategies.**

Comprehension strategies are conscious plans—sets of steps that good readers use to make sense of text. Comprehension strategy instruction helps students become purposeful, active readers who are in control of their own reading comprehension.

The following six strategies appear to have a firm scientific basis for improving text comprehension.

**Monitoring comprehension.** Students who are good at monitoring their comprehension know when they understand what they read and when they do not. They have strategies to “fix up” problems in their understanding as the problems arise. Research shows that instruction, even in the early grades, can help students become better at monitoring their comprehension.

Comprehension monitoring instruction teaches students to

- be aware of what they **do** understand,
- identify what they **do not** understand, and
- use appropriate “fix-up” strategies to resolve problems in comprehension.

## Meta-cognition

Metacognition can be defined as “thinking about thinking.” Good readers use metacognitive strategies to think about and have control over their reading.

Before reading, they might clarify their purpose for reading and preview the text. During reading, they might monitor their understanding, adjusting their reading speed to fit the difficulty of the text and “fixing up” any comprehension problems they have. After reading, they check their understanding of what they read.

Comprehension monitoring, a critical part of metacognition, has received a great deal of attention in the reading research.

Students may use several comprehension monitoring strategies.

- Identify where the difficulty occurs ("I don't understand the second paragraph on page 76:").
- Identify what the difficulty is ("I don't get what the author means when she says, 'Arriving in America was a milestone in my grandmother's life.'").
- Restate the difficult sentence or passage in their own words ("Oh, so the author means that coming to America was a very important event in her grandmother's life:").
- Look back through the text ("The author talked about Mr. McBride in Chapter 2, but I don't remember much about him. Maybe if I reread that chapter, I can figure out why he's acting this way now:").
- Look forward in the text for information that might help them to resolve the difficulty. ("The text says, 'The groundwater may form a stream or pond or create a wetland. People can also bring groundwater to the surface.' Hmm, I don't understand how people can do that ... Oh, the next section is called 'Wells.' I'll read this section to see if it tells how they do it:").

**Using graphic and semantic organizers.** Graphic organizers illustrate concepts and interrelationships among concepts in a text, using diagrams or other pictorial devices. Graphic organizers are known by different names, such as maps, webs, graphs, charts, frames, or clusters. Semantic organizers (also called semantic maps or semantic webs) are graphic organizers that look somewhat like a spider web. In a semantic organizer, lines connect a central concept to a variety of related ideas and events.



Regardless of the label, graphic organizers can help readers focus on concepts and how they are related to other concepts. Graphic organizers help students read to learn from informational text in the content areas, such as science and social studies textbooks and trade books. Used with informational text, graphic organizers can help students see how concepts fit common text structures. Graphic organizers are also used with narrative text, or stories, as story maps.

Graphic organizers can:

- help students focus on text structure as they read;
- provide students with tools they can use to examine and visually represent relationships in a text; and
- help students write well-organized summaries of a text.

**Answering questions.** Teachers have long used questions to guide and monitor students' learning. Research shows that teacher questioning strongly supports and advances students' learning from reading. Questions appear to be effective for improving learning from reading because they:

- give students a purpose for reading;
- focus students' attention on what they are to learn;
- help students to think actively as they read;
- encourage students to monitor their comprehension; and
- help students to review content and relate what they have learned to what they already know.

Question-answering instruction encourages students to learn to answer questions better and, therefore, to learn more as they read. One type of question-answering instruction simply teaches students to look back in the text to find answers to questions that they cannot answer after the initial reading. Another type helps students understand question-answer relationships—the relationships between questions and where the answers to those questions are found. In this instruction, readers learn to answer questions that require an understanding of information that is

- text explicit (stated explicitly in a single sentence);
- text implicit (implied by information presented in two or more sentences); or
- scriptal (not found in the text at all, but part of the reader's prior knowledge or experience).

**Generating questions.** Teaching students to ask their own questions improves their active processing of text and their comprehension. By generating questions, students become aware of whether they can answer the questions and if they understand what they are reading. Students learn to ask themselves questions that require them to integrate information from different segments of text. For example, students can be taught to ask main idea questions that relate to important information in a text.

## Examples of question-answer relationships

**Text:** (from *The Skirt*, by Gary Soto)

After stepping off the bus, Miata Ramirez turned around and gasped, “Ay!” The school bus lurched, coughed a puff of stinky exhaust, and made a wide turn at the corner. The driver strained as he worked the steering wheel like the horns of a bull.

Miata yelled for the driver to stop. She started running after the bus. Her hair whipped against her shoulders. A large book bag tugged at her arm with each running step, and bead earrings jingled as they banged against her neck.

“My skirt!” she cried loudly. “Stop!”

**Question:** Did Miata try to get the driver to stop?

**Answer:** Yes.

**Question-Answer Relationship** (Text explicit, because the information is given in one sentence):

“Miata yelled for the driver to stop.”

**Question:** Why did Miata want the driver to stop?

**Answer:** She suddenly remembered that she had left a skirt on the bus.

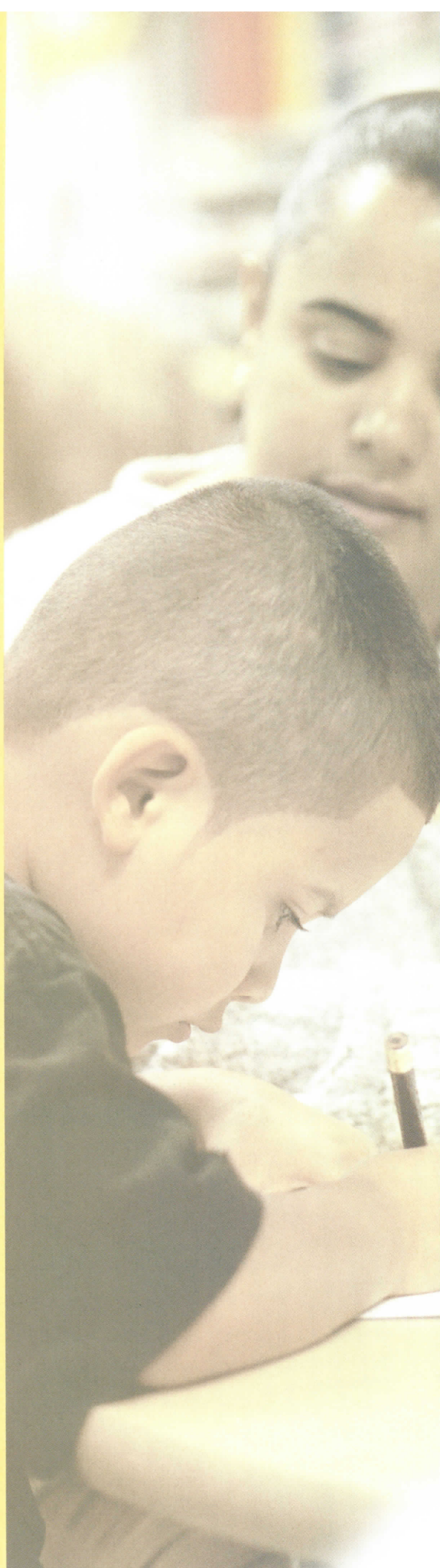
**Question-Answer Relationship** (Text implicit, because the information must be inferred from different parts of the text):

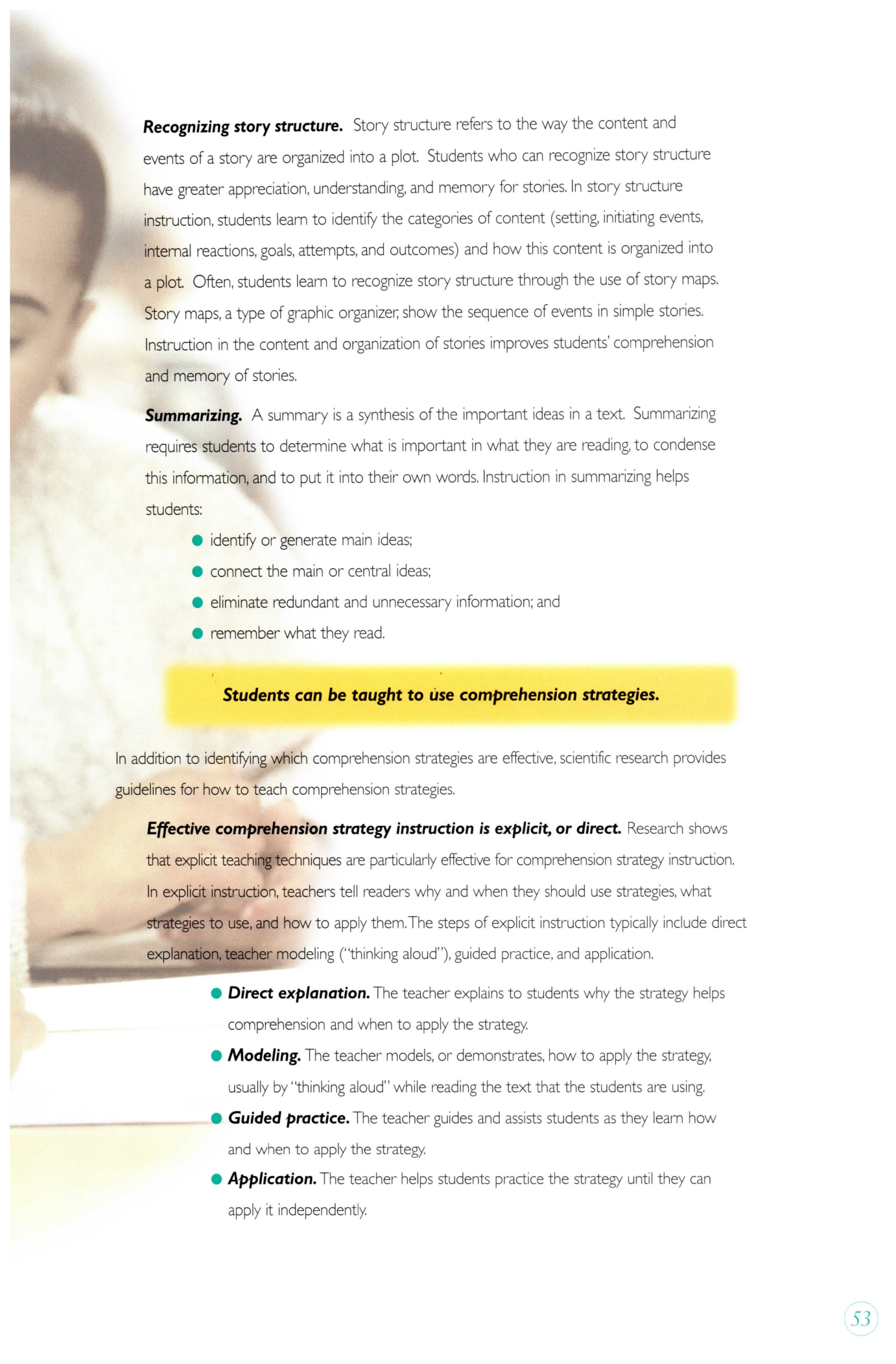
Miata is crying “My skirt!” as she is trying to get the driver to stop.

**Question:** Was the skirt important to Miata?

**Answer:** Yes.

**Question-Answer Relationship** (Scriptal, because the information is not contained in the text, but must be drawn from the reader’s prior knowledge): She probably would not have tried so hard to get the driver to stop if the skirt were not important to her.





**Recognizing story structure.** Story structure refers to the way the content and events of a story are organized into a plot. Students who can recognize story structure have greater appreciation, understanding, and memory for stories. In story structure instruction, students learn to identify the categories of content (setting, initiating events, internal reactions, goals, attempts, and outcomes) and how this content is organized into a plot. Often, students learn to recognize story structure through the use of story maps. Story maps, a type of graphic organizer, show the sequence of events in simple stories. Instruction in the content and organization of stories improves students' comprehension and memory of stories.

**Summarizing.** A summary is a synthesis of the important ideas in a text. Summarizing requires students to determine what is important in what they are reading, to condense this information, and to put it into their own words. Instruction in summarizing helps students:

- identify or generate main ideas;
- connect the main or central ideas;
- eliminate redundant and unnecessary information; and
- remember what they read.

### **Students can be taught to use comprehension strategies.**

In addition to identifying which comprehension strategies are effective, scientific research provides guidelines for how to teach comprehension strategies.

**Effective comprehension strategy instruction is explicit, or direct.** Research shows that explicit teaching techniques are particularly effective for comprehension strategy instruction. In explicit instruction, teachers tell readers why and when they should use strategies, what strategies to use, and how to apply them. The steps of explicit instruction typically include direct explanation, teacher modeling ("thinking aloud"), guided practice, and application.

- **Direct explanation.** The teacher explains to students why the strategy helps comprehension and when to apply the strategy.
- **Modeling.** The teacher models, or demonstrates, how to apply the strategy, usually by "thinking aloud" while reading the text that the students are using.
- **Guided practice.** The teacher guides and assists students as they learn how and when to apply the strategy.
- **Application.** The teacher helps students practice the strategy until they can apply it independently.



**Effective comprehension strategy instruction can be accomplished through cooperative learning.** Cooperative learning (and the closely related concept, collaborative learning) involves students working together as partners or in small groups on clearly defined tasks. Cooperative learning instruction has been used successfully to teach comprehension strategies in content-area subjects. Students work together to understand content-area texts, helping each other learn and apply comprehension strategies. Teachers help students learn to work in groups. Teachers also provide demonstrations of the comprehension strategies and monitor the progress of students.

**Effective instruction helps readers use comprehension strategies flexibly and in combination.** Although it can be helpful to provide students with instruction in individual comprehension strategies, good readers must be able to coordinate and adjust several strategies to assist comprehension.

Multiple-strategy instruction teaches students how to use strategies flexibly as they are needed to assist their comprehension. In a well-known example of multiple-strategy instruction called "reciprocal teaching," the teacher and students work together so that the students learn four comprehension strategies:

- asking questions about the text they are reading;
- summarizing parts of the text;
- clarifying words and sentences they don't understand; and
- predicting what might occur next in the text.

Teachers and students use these four strategies flexibly as they are needed in reading literature and informational texts.



# Questions you may have about text comprehension instruction

## Is enough known about comprehension strategy instruction for me to implement it in my classroom?

Yes. Scientific study of text comprehension instruction over the past 30 years has suggested instructional approaches that are ready to be implemented in classrooms.

## When should text comprehension instruction begin?

Even teachers in the primary grades can begin to build the foundation for reading comprehension. Reading is a complex process that develops over time. Although the basics of reading—word recognition and fluency—can be learned in a few years, reading to learn subject matter does not occur automatically once students have “learned to read.” Teachers should emphasize text comprehension from the beginning, rather than waiting until students have mastered “the basics” of reading. Instruction at all grade levels can benefit from showing students how reading is a process of making sense out of text, or constructing meaning. Beginning readers, as well as more advanced readers, must understand that the ultimate goal of reading is comprehension.

You can highlight meaning in all interactions with text. Talk about the content, whether reading aloud to students or guiding them in reading on their own. Model, or “think aloud,” about your own thinking and understanding as you read. Lead students in a discussion about the meaning of what they are reading. Help students relate the content to their experience and to other texts they have read. Encourage students to ask questions about the text.

## Has research identified comprehension strategies other than the six described here?

The six strategies described have received the strongest scientific support. The following strategies, however, have received some support from research. You may want to consider them for use in your classroom.

**Making use of prior knowledge.** Good readers draw on prior knowledge and experience to help them understand what they are reading. You can help your students make use of their prior knowledge to improve their comprehension. Before your students read, preview the text with them. As part of previewing, ask the students what they already know about the content of the selection (for example, the topic, the concept, or the time period). Ask them what they know about the author and what text structure he or she is likely to use. Discuss the important vocabulary used in the text. Show students some pictures or diagrams to prepare them for what they are about to read.



**Using mental imagery.** Good readers often form mental pictures, or images, as they read. Readers (especially younger readers) who visualize during reading understand and remember what they read better than readers who do not visualize. Help your students learn to form visual images of what they are reading. For example, urge them to picture a setting, character, or event described in the text.

### **Which comprehension strategies should be taught? When should they be taught?**

Comprehension strategies are not ends in themselves; they are means of helping your students understand what they are reading. Help your students learn to use comprehension strategies in natural learning situations—for example, as they read in the content areas. If your students are struggling to identify and remember the main points in a chapter they are reading in their social studies textbook, teach them how to write summaries. Or, if students have read a chapter in their science textbook but are unable to answer questions about the chapter, teach them question-answering strategies. When your students find that using comprehension strategies can help them to learn, they are more likely to be motivated and involved actively in learning.

Keep in mind that not all comprehension strategies work for all types of text. Obviously, you can only teach story structure when students are reading stories, not informational text or poetry.

## Summing up

**Text comprehension is important because**

- comprehension is the reason for reading.

**Text comprehension is**

- purposeful.
- active.

**Text comprehension can be developed**

- by teaching comprehension strategies.

**Text comprehension strategies can be taught**

- through explicit instruction.
- through cooperative learning.
- by helping readers use strategies flexibly and in combination.



