

Do's and don'ts for teaching comprehension

by Anna Geiger, M.Ed.



Read this blogpost on [themeasuredmom.com](https://www.themeasuredmom.com):

<https://www.themeasuredmom.com/dos-and-donts-for-teaching-comprehension/>

Are you teaching reading in K-2? Then you've probably heard this advice: "Focus on phonics. Get those foundational skills solid. Comprehension can wait."

I understand the pressure to prioritize decoding skills – and I fully support an initial focus on phonemic awareness and phonics. After all, if students can't read the words, how can they understand them?

But here's the thing ... comprehension isn't something we should put on the back burner. In fact, research tells us that even our youngest readers benefit from explicit comprehension instruction ... *alongside* their phonics instruction.

Let's look at some important do's and don'ts for teaching comprehension in the primary grades.

› **DON'T wait to teach comprehension.**

Have you ever heard people say that in the primary grades, children "learn to read" and in the later stages they "read to learn"? There's some truth to that. At the very early stages, students cannot comprehend what they're reading because they're not reading fast enough.

They have to develop some automaticity with word recognition and fluency of rhythm to be able to free up more of their brains for comprehension.

However, the act of teaching comprehension isn't something we should push off to a later date.

In their article in *The Reading Teacher*, [The Science of Reading Comprehension Instruction](#), Duke, Ward & Pearson have this to say:

Given the absolute necessity of foundational word-reading skills, it is tempting to think that instruction should begin with a focus on developing those and later turning to comprehension.

However, research has supported a simultaneous, rather than sequential model of reading instruction.

Along with development of phonological awareness, print concepts, and alphabet knowledge, young learners in preschool and early elementary school benefit from efforts to develop oral language comprehension ...

As young learners begin to read texts themselves, comprehension instruction, alongside phonics and other foundational skills instruction, has an important place.

Nell K. Duke, Alessandra E. Ward & P. David Pearson

We might ask ... how do we teach comprehension when students aren't doing much reading? Or when the reading they do is slow and tedious because they're still learning phonic decoding?

The answer lies in reading aloud to your students.

› **DO spend time planning powerful interactive read alouds.**

An interactive read aloud is not when you grab a book off the shelf to fill five minutes. While that's certainly a good thing to do, an interactive read aloud is something you *plan* for.

You choose a book before you meet with your students, determine teaching points (such as skills and vocabulary), and (if you'd like) jot them down on sticky notes. Put those notes at the places in the book where you plan to stop and talk. Then read and enjoy!

In an interactive read aloud you might...

Do these things before you read

- talk about the author and illustrator
- take a sneak peek at the book before you read (read the back or inside summary)
- examine the table of contents
- invite students to discuss what they already know about the topic
- make predictions about what will be in the text

Do these things as you read

- stop to examine new vocabulary words
- think aloud as you read
- invite students to make connections to the text
- encourage students to interact with the book by having them talk to a partner, act out a sentence or short part of the book, make a quick sketch or note, or participate in a class discussion

Do these things after you read

- ask students to retell the story
- have students name things learned
- check predictions

When you ask thought-provoking and open-ended questions, your students will engage in high-level thinking. With your help, they will have thoughtful discussions with you and their classmates.

› **DON'T confuse reading comprehension products with reading comprehension processes.**

The **products** of reading comprehension are demonstrations of what the reader knows and understands AFTER reading.

Examples of reading comprehension products include:

- Answering text-based questions
- Writing a summary
- Completing a worksheet about a book
- Retelling a story
- Completing a graphic organizer about a text

In contrast, a reading comprehension *process* is a skill or process that students have which enables them to create the product.

Examples of reading comprehension processes include:

- Making inferences
- Monitoring comprehension
- Making predictions
- Asking questions while reading

What's the point, you ask? The point is that, too often, we have our students complete products and think that we're teaching comprehension. We're not.

When you assign a worksheet with questions after students read a story, you're not teaching comprehension. You're *assessing* comprehension.

Teaching and assessing both have their place, but let's not fool ourselves into thinking we're teaching when we're just checking understanding.

We must make time to explicitly teach reading comprehension processes.

It troubles me when I hear some people in the science of reading community claim that once students are proficient with decoding and reading fluently, comprehension will "just happen."

We can't (and shouldn't!) count on that. Comprehension is just like everything else in a structured literacy classroom. We must explicitly teach it.

› **DO teach reading comprehension strategies in K-2.**

In recent years, reading comprehension strategy instruction has come under attack. This may be for good reason; some teachers (I'm raising my hand here!) have focused so much on the *process* that they almost forget about the *product*.

For example, a reading lesson becomes more about learning the skill of activating prior knowledge than about actually learning the life cycle of a frog.

Here's a key thing to remember:

Reading comprehension strategies should be taught as TOOLS to help students comprehend text. They are not an end in themselves.

All that said, researchers tell us that even primary students benefit from reading strategy instruction (and – you guessed it – a lot of this instruction will happen through explicit modeling during interactive read alouds).

Here's an infographic with strategies to emphasize in the early grades.

Recommended

READING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES FOR K-2

IDENTIFYING TEXT STRUCTURE

When students identify the narrative or expository text structure, they are better able to make sense of what they read. Teachers can model the use of graphic organizers as they teach this strategy.



ASKING QUESTIONS

Students should ask questions as they read to help them actively engage with the text.



MAKING INFERENCES

Students should be taught to “read between the lines” as they make conclusions based on their own evidence and reasoning.



SUMMARIZING

Even young students can be taught to identify the most important who or what, identify what the who or what *did*, and combine that information into a sentence.



MONITORING COMPREHENSION

When they monitor their comprehension, students notice when what they are reading does not make sense. When meaning breaks down, they should reread or use strategies to help them understand what they read.



› DO consider using a lesson plan template when teaching reading comprehension.

As you're planning your interactive read aloud, whole group lessons in which students read grade-level text, or small group lessons, take some time working through a template like this one.

This template is based on the Berger Framework:

- **Summary of understandings:** What themes or concepts do you want your students to learn from this text?
- **Text challenges to address:** What challenging sentence structure, inferences, etc. will students need help with?
- **Before reading:** What will you do to prepare students to read? You might activate/build prior knowledge, introduce vocabulary, and/or set a purpose for reading.
- **During reading:** Where will you stop to analyze text structure, ask a question, make an inference, etc.?
- **After reading:** What questions will you ask, how will you teach vocabulary, and what independent work (if any) will students do in response to the text?

If you're looking for texts for students to read when using the above framework, I've got great news! I have a variety of reading comprehension passages in my shop. Get a FREE sample at the end of this post.

› Let's sum up!

- **DON'T wait to teach reading comprehension.** Researchers tell us that students can learn comprehension alongside other early reading skills.
- **DO spend time preparing powerful interactive read alouds** ... the ideal time to teach comprehension to our youngest readers.
- **DON'T confuse reading comprehension processes and products.** Giving worksheets isn't teaching students how to comprehend; it's assessing them.
- **DO teach reading comprehension strategies.**
- **DO consider using a lesson plan template when planning reading comprehension lessons.** Download the free reading passage at the end of the post and give it a try!

More resources for you

- Get the book, [Reach All Readers](#)
- Sign up for the [Reach All Readers online course](#)
- Join our [membership for K-3rd grade teachers](#)

Research references

Adams, M. J. (2014). Knowledge for literacy. *American Federation of Teachers*.

Catts, H. W. (2022). Rethinking how to promote reading comprehension. *American Educator*, 45(4), 26.

Shanahan, T. (2019). *Improving reading comprehension in the primary grades*. NCCA.

Johnson-Laird, P. N.

(1983). *Mental models: Towards a cognitive science of language, inference, and consciousness* (No. 6). Harvard University Press.

National Reading Panel (U.S.) & National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (U.S.). (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction*. U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, PublicHealth Service, National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Oakhill, J., Cain, K., & Elbro, C.

(2015). *Understanding and teaching reading comprehension*. Routledge.

Smith, R., Snow, P., Serry, T., & Hammond, L. (2021). The role of background knowledge in reading comprehension: A critical review. *Reading Psychology*, 42(3), 214-240.

Snow, C., & RAND Reading Study Group.

(2002). *A research agenda for improving reading comprehension*. RAND Corporation.

Williams, J. P. (2005). Instruction in reading comprehension for primary-grade students: A focus on text structure. *The Journal of Special Education*, 39(1), 6-18.