



# The Biggest Mistake to Avoid When Building Comprehension

Reach All Readers Podcast #246

Today I want to start with a situation I know we've all seen. Your students read the text, they get all the way to the end, and then they try to answer the questions. But they can't. They've read the words, they made it through the text, and now you're wondering where comprehension broke down.

Was it a sentence they didn't understand, a word they didn't know, or a paragraph where they lost the meaning? Was it just the whole thing?

When the only questions we ask of our students come at the end of the reading, we don't have enough information to know where comprehension broke down. End-of-text questions are often doing the work of assessment, not instruction.

Now having students think about a text after they've read or listened matters. Discussing a text, answering questions about a text, and writing in response to a text can absolutely build comprehension when students have enough understanding of the text to work with. That's not the problem. Answering questions, talking about text, and writing in response to it are all important.

The problem is when all of that work happens *after* reading, without enough support *during* reading, and we're left trying to figure out where comprehension broke down.

So today I want to challenge you to think about using questions not just to check comprehension, but to guide and support comprehension as it's being built.

When questions come only at the end, after students are done reading, here's what's happening. Students read or listen, then respond to questions, and we find out what they understood. That is useful, but it comes after the meaning-making work has already happened.

If comprehension broke down during the reading, end-of-text questions don't repair the breakdown, they just tell us it happened. End-of-text questions are good, but they're not good enough on their own.

Now we know from research that questioning is very important as a way to enhance reading comprehension, *especially* when questions are used *during* reading, and when students are encouraged to ask their own questions. Questioning pushes readers forward in their understanding of text.

So again, the issue is not in asking questions, it's relying only on end-of-text questions instead of as one part of a larger comprehension system, you might say.

So that's the biggest mistake to avoid when teaching comprehension, saving questions until the end of the reading only.

When questions are used instructionally, they serve a different role. They guide attention, support meaning-making, and help students monitor understanding as they read.

One well-researched approach is called Questioning the Author, often referred to as QtA. It's built on the important idea that comprehension is a shared responsibility between the reader and the author. So it's the reader's job to make sense of the text, but it's also the author's job to communicate ideas clearly, and authors don't always do that successfully. Questioning the Author frees students to grapple with the text instead of assuming that confusion is always their fault.

During Questioning the Author, students engage actively with the text as they read. The teacher is pre-planning discussion stopping points. They're having students stop and ask questions of the author about the text. What is the author trying to tell us here? Why is the author telling us that? Does the author explain this clearly? How does this connect to what I read earlier?

These aren't recall questions. They help students notice confusion, clarify meaning, and build understanding as the text unfolds. It also empowers students as readers because it positions them as thinkers who can question the text and even the author's choices.

Another example of instructional questioning is a strategy called Get the Gist, sometimes called paragraph shrinking. After reading a paragraph, students answer two very purposeful questions, often done with a partner. Who or what is this paragraph mostly about, and what is the most important thing about that who or what? Then they put that information into a sentence, often ten words or fewer.

These questions require students to summarize, to prioritize information, and it helps them monitor comprehension because if they can't answer those questions, they need to go back and reread that section.

If they struggle to answer the questions, that signals a need for support in the moment, while comprehension is still being constructed. It makes so much more sense to do this by the paragraph level than to wait until the end of the passage.

Instructional questioning can also include brief turn-and-talks at intentional points in the text. The teacher plans questions in advance. After reading a particular part of the text, she stops students and gives them a question to answer with a partner, often with a sentence stem so they can easily get started.

A good question sends students back into the text to discover the answer, rather than away from it. It maybe combines what they know with what's in the text. This can happen during reading and after reading.

In all of these examples, questions are not an afterthought or simply a check. They are used to guide comprehension, to support meaning-making, and to help students monitor understanding.

Asking and answering questions are really important, but they work best when they are part of a larger comprehension system and not just saved for the end of a reading.

If you want to dive deeper into this topic, I would love for you to join me for my workshop, "Building Comprehension from the Ground Up." In that training, we bust common myths related to reading comprehension, explore what research truly says about teaching comprehension, and I'll also share practical tips and tools you can use right away. You can sign up for that using the link below this episode.

Whether or not you join me for the workshop, I would encourage you to start paying attention to when and how questions show up in your comprehension lessons. Are they helping students build meaning as they read, or are they only showing you what happened after the fact?

Thanks so much for listening, and I'll talk to you next time!