



# Promoting Reading Comprehension in Secondary Students With LD

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## **What is reading comprehension?**

Reading comprehension is “the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language” (Snow, 2002, p.11). Extracting meaning from text is to understand what the author has explicitly or implicitly stated. Constructing meaning is to interpret what the author has written based on the reader’s background knowledge, experiences, capabilities, and abilities.

## **Why is reading comprehension important for secondary students with learning disabilities?**

Students in Grades 4-12 spend the majority of their days in content-area classes. As students advance in school, researchers suggest reading instruction should become more disciplinary (tied to content areas), reinforcing and supporting students’ academic performance (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). All content-area instruction (e.g., English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies) utilizes literary or informational text in some manner, so students must comprehend specific texts and grasp the concepts being communicated in them. This is a particular concern as the texts students are asked to read become increasingly complex with unique linguistic and cognitive features that are not

necessarily shared across disciplines.

## **What is the goal of reading comprehension instruction for secondary students with learning disabilities?**

The goal of reading comprehension instruction is to help students understand written language. Students who comprehend well monitor their understanding as they read and use fix-up strategies, such as re-reading or summarizing, when understanding breaks down. Self-monitoring also helps students relate new information to their prior knowledge, fostering better understanding. However, many adolescents struggle to comprehend text due to a lack of background knowledge, an inability to relate content to prior knowledge, an inability to read text fluently, difficulty decoding words, an inability to attend to meaning while reading, an inability to use comprehension strategies, deficits in metacognition (often not aware they are not comprehending), or difficulty understanding the meanings of words (Boardman et al., 2008; Pressley, 2006; Reed & Vaughn, 2010).

We teach comprehension so that all students “can read a variety of materials with ease and interest, can read for varying purposes, and can read with comprehension even when the material is neither easy to understand nor intrinsically interesting”

(Snow, 2002, p. xiii). This is particularly true for adolescent readers who increasingly need to gain meaning from conceptually dense texts, as well as to remember and use the information (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Perfetti, Landi, & Oakhill, 2005).

**What are comprehension research-based guidelines and strategies to implement with secondary students with learning disabilities?**

In *Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices* (Kamil et al., 2008), the panel describes elements important for those adolescents who need more support in reading comprehension. Students' learning needs should be identified through the use of an initial screening test or a threshold score on a required reading test and subsequent use of a diagnostic reading test administered, scored, and interpreted by a specialist. Then, the selection of a supplemental, intensive, and individualized reading intervention needs to be made. The intervention program or approach should provide an explicit instructional focus targeted to meet the learners' needs. The intervention should be provided by a reading specialist or teacher who has participated in thorough training in the use of the program or approach. Teachers or reading specialists should also have professional development to increase their understanding of adolescent struggling readers. Other elements for effective interventions noted by the panel include:

- Word level interventions (e.g., systematic training in metacognitive decoding skills, such as subsyllabic segmentation)
- Explicit instruction, with scaffolding and feedback, of approaches that help students become more active, strategic readers
- Student collaboration in comprehension strategies (relies on teacher guidance)

- Reciprocal Teaching
- Graphic organizers to assist in understanding relationships among key concepts represented in texts
- Specific instruction on text structures, organizational patterns, and linguistic conventions commonly found in expository text
- Work in small groups or individually to increase intensity.
- Increased amount of time and frequency working with students who are struggling.
- Progress monitoring to determine if interventions are effective and to make instructional adjustments.

Most students demonstrate improved reading achievement when their teachers incorporate the following components of effective comprehension instruction before, during, and after reading (Edmonds et al., 2009; Snow, 2002):

- purposeful and explicit teaching,
- classroom interactions that support the understanding of content area texts,
- instruction in the skills and strategies used by expert readers, and
- content-area texts that are appropriately matched to students' abilities and the specific strategy being implemented.

These instructional practices usually can be implemented class-wide in any content area. In fact, comprehension strategies work best when taught and practiced in meaningful contexts, so using authentic material in core academic classes makes sense.

## Before Reading

- Teach students how to activate their background knowledge in connection with the topic to be read. Students better understand, think about, and retain new information when they are familiar with or taught background knowledge of a topic before reading. Activate prior knowledge by previewing text before reading:
  - Use specific strategies to activate prior knowledge, such as previewing headings or key concepts, or making a prediction and confirmation chart.
  - Prepare and guide previewing activities to support and focus the connections students make.
  - Use graphic organizers to introduce important information, to solicit prior knowledge from students, and to make predictions.
  - Avoid soliciting guesses from students without guidance or feedback.
  - Keep it short. Previewing should not take longer than 5 minutes, especially if a teacher has limited time with students.
  - Revisit after reading to assist in reviewing, confirming or refuting predictions, summarizing, and making connections.
- Explicitly teach key specialized vocabulary related to the topic.
- Teach and have students practice how to set a purpose for reading.
- Use an anticipation-reaction guide to help students link new and prior knowledge and activate students' interest and curiosity for the topic, promoting motivation and engagement.

## During Reading

- Explicitly teach students to ask and answer questions about text.
  - Teach students to ask and answer specific types of questions, such as questions whose answers are explicitly stated in the text and those that require students to make inferences based on what they have read (e.g., Question-Answer Relationship).
  - Use question generation on its own or as part of multi-strategy (e.g., Reciprocal Teaching) instruction.
  - Provide students with strategies to evaluate teacher-generated questions. For example, it is important to know if the answer will be found in the text or if it should be inferred.
- Use graphic organizers which are visual representations that help students identify, organize, and remember important ideas from what they read. Adapt graphic organizers to text type (e.g., Venn diagram for compare/contrast informational text; story grammar map for literary text). Explicitly teach the use of graphic organizers to
  - represent and discuss connections,
  - confirm or refute predictions, and
  - record important information.
- Explicitly teach comprehension monitoring strategies, or fix-up strategies when comprehension breaks down such as
  - Re-reading,
  - Asking someone questions about the text,
  - Considering relevant background knowledge, and
  - Examining the graphics more carefully

## After Reading

- Teach students how to use self-questioning strategies to reflect on what they have read.
- Explicitly teach students to summarize the main ideas of what they read:
  - Teach students to summarize small amounts of text such as a short paragraph before summarizing longer sections.
  - Provide modeling, feedback, and many opportunities to practice summarization rules such as:
    - Selecting a topic sentence or inventing a topic sentence if one is not explicitly stated;
    - Using one word to replace a list of related items;
    - Deleting trivial and redundant information; and
    - Re-reading to make sure your summary makes sense.
  - Teach students how to use graphic organizers to write summaries.
  - Provide examples and non-examples of summaries to help students recognize and produce summaries that contain only key ideas.
- Explicitly teach the use of graphic organizers to
  - write summaries,
  - review information, and
  - make connections

## What are some guidelines for English-language learners (ELL)?

Francis et al., (2007) outline recommendations to guide the planning and implementation of any instructional

approach or academic intervention to promote ELLs' reading ability:

- ELLs need early, explicit, and intensive instruction in phonological awareness and phonics in order to build decoding skills.
- K-12 classrooms across the nation must increase opportunities for ELLs to develop sophisticated vocabulary knowledge.
- Reading instruction in K-12 classrooms must equip ELLs with strategies and knowledge to comprehend and analyze challenging narrative and expository texts.
- Instruction and intervention to promote ELLs' reading fluency must focus on vocabulary and increased exposure to print.
- In all K-12 classrooms across the U.S., ELLs need significant opportunities to engage in structured, academic talk.
- Independent reading is only beneficial when it is structured and purposeful, and there is a good reader-text match.

## What materials can be used to teach reading comprehension to struggling secondary students?

- Any other text such as magazines, newspaper articles, Internet sources, library books, all of which can supplement content area learning. These sources need to be of high interest to and appropriate for secondary students.
- Ways for students to monitor their reading such as graphic organizers, study guides, note-taking charts, reading logs, timelines, checklists, cloze activities, journals.
- Sticky notes, index cards, or any type of paper for students to write summaries,

predictions, questions, and unknown words as they read sections of text.

- Informative posters, definitions, charts, maps, and graphs on the walls in the classroom to reinforce concepts and vocabulary.

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### Suggested Resources

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Kosanovich, M. L., & MaGill, K. (2007). *Teacher Resource Guide* (with professional development DVD) to accompany the Fourth and Fifth Student Center Activities. Florida Center for Reading Research. <http://www.fcrr.org/curriculum/studentCenterActivities45.shtm>

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