

Comprehension

Mr. Lausch has formed a small group of five students in his second-grade classroom. He tells me that these students have some basic comprehension, but they don't think deeply. They often just decode and don't seem to be thinking about what they're reading. This group needs lots of support to help them think through inferences in the text, so he has asked me, his literacy coach, to show him what this kind of teaching looks like.

This group is just starting the book *Four on the Shore*, by James Marshall. It is easy enough for them to decode and will require deeper thinking, since this author's books are filled with wit and subtle humor. To help them focus their thinking, I begin by reviewing what they'll be thinking about as they read fiction—characters; setting; problem; solution; beginning, middle, and end; and author's purpose. I have these posted on a retelling glove; this visual really gets their attention. (See Figure 4.1.) The children are familiar with all these elements but have not applied them to their reading. I tell them that reading is *thinking* and that I'll help them with their thinking as they read today.

Figure 4.1 Retelling glove for fiction provides a scaffold to guide kids' thinking while reading stories.



We use the cover to infer that there are four characters having a campout at a lake. Then I have them turn to page 3, look at the picture, and *think* before reading. I ask them to find out the names of the four characters and figure out which is which,

using the picture again to help them infer. As they read quietly, I listen in to individuals. They decode accurately and with some fluency.

After they read, the group names Spider, Sam, and Lolly as three of the characters. They use the pictures and explain how they know who each one is. They infer *why* Spider got his name. (His hair looks like spider legs in the picture.) However, they have trouble figuring out who the fourth character is, since he hasn't been named in the text. They can only see his legs dangling from a tree in the picture. The text says, "'Spider,' said Lolly. 'Your little brother is getting on my nerves.'" They have trouble figuring out who's talking, so I ask a few questions to scaffold their thinking:

"If it says, 'said Lolly,' who's talking?"

"Who's Lolly talking to?"

"So, whose little brother is it?"

These questions support their inferences, and they figure it out. The children in this group need lots of support to help them think, but they *can* do it. I set the bar high, and they know I expect they *will* comprehend. I don't take, "I don't know" as an answer. I just ask another, more supportive, question to help them figure it out.

They tell me that this book is kind of hard and they must think. They're starting to get it. I ask, "What did we use to help us figure it out?" They respond with, "We used the names, the words, the pictures of the characters, and our brains. We were thinking."

Delighted that they are trying to comprehend, I ask them to read the next four pages. Before they read, they tell me they will *think*. I give each of them a sticky note and have them place it at the bottom of page 7, where they will stop today. Next, I tell them to read and find out the name of the little brother and where they're going. I ask them to write their predictions of what might happen next in the book on their sticky note when they finish. While they read independently, I listen in to indi-

viduals and have brief conversations with each about what they've found out so far. I'm amazed at how much better they're doing.

After they all finish, we have a small-group discussion. They are so excited, because they've understood what they've read. Their predictions are accurate. They're making personal connections; they've figured out what will probably happen next . . . and it makes sense. I close the lesson by asking, "What was different today?" Their responses include, "We were thinking and tried to help ourselves. Writing down helped me think. So did the cover. We used our brains." I remind them that every time they read, they must do the same thing. Then they'll understand it just like they did today. They look forward to reading the next chapter.

Mr. Lausch and I debrief after the lesson. He's very impressed with the level of thinking his kids did. "Teaching comprehension sure is a lot of work," he notes. "You really expected my kids to do it, and they did. I can see that I gave them too many of the answers in the past." He decides to model with the retelling glove in whole-group instruction and then move it to small group for reinforcement.

What Is Comprehension?

Comprehension is understanding. It involves thinking and can be likened to a conversation between the reader and the text. It can be basic, as in understanding a general message, or deep, as in inferring and generalizing ideas. Comprehension first develops as listening comprehension in infants and toddlers as they listen to the world around them and begin to respond.

In the classroom, I start by teaching comprehension in whole group. I model comprehension strategies—such as making connections, questioning, visualizing, inferring, determining importance, making generalizations, and summarizing—while I read aloud engaging, high-quality literature to students. Once students demonstrate listening comprehension, they can learn (with support and guid-

ance) to transfer those same skills to the act of reading comprehension.

At first, they will need to read text that is easy enough for them to decode so they can use more of their mental energy to understand, or comprehend, what they read. In small group, I make sure students are reading at their instructional reading level, or text that is no harder than one they can read with 90 to 94 percent accuracy, some fluency, and some basic comprehension. If the text is too hard for them to decode, they'll have to use too much thinking power for phonics. And they'll have no brainpower left for comprehension. Think about the students in Mr. Lausch's group. Their brains weren't used to thinking about comprehension, but they could be trained to do so when the decoding wasn't too difficult.

Comprehension is important because it is the goal of reading. If we do not understand what we read, then why would we want to read? In kindergarten I was taught Spanish in an "enrichment" class. In high school, I also studied Spanish. Today, I can *decode* Spanish, but I don't *comprehend* what I've "read." Therefore, I don't say I can *read* Spanish; instead, I say I can *decode* this language. I have no comprehension of what I've read, because I don't have the vocabulary and the oral language to support my decoding.

This is one of the greatest dangers in our reading instruction . . . that we think we're teaching *reading* when in actuality we've essentially taught *decoding*. Teaching comprehension is critical to ensure that students understand what they've read. I'm not just talking basic recall here, but am referring to a deeper understanding of why the characters acted like they did in a fiction book or how students might use the facts gleaned from reading an informational text.

Some educators think it's a good idea to teach kids to decode first and then teach them to comprehend. My recommendation is that we should teach comprehension from the start. We should be modeling how to comprehend in our daily read-

aloud and shared reading sessions with students. All text we ask students to read should make sense so they get used to thinking about everything and anything they read.

Along with comprehension, we must also consider vocabulary. As students move into higher levels of reading, they often lose meaning because they skim over new vocabulary. See Chapter 8 on vocabulary teaching for more ideas and then integrate them into your comprehension lessons as needed.

Comprehension Research at a Glance

Before the 1980s, many teachers, including myself, were very good at *testing*, not *teaching*, comprehension. More recent research has shown us what to do to teach students how to comprehend. Here is a summary of some general comprehension studies you might find helpful when planning comprehension instruction:

- Comprehension strategies can be taught effectively through think-alouds (Bereiter and Bird 1985).
- Rosenblatt's (1978) theory of transactional analysis says that the reading of any work of literature is an individual and unique occurrence involving the mind and emotions of a particular reader.
- Good comprehenders use a range of comprehension strategies to deepen and enrich their understanding of what they are reading (Pressley, El-Dinary, and Brown 1992).
- Those who comprehend well are aware of their own thinking processes and make conscious decisions to use different comprehension strategies as they read, especially when they detect problems in understanding what they are reading (Baker and Brown 1984).
- Good readers attribute successful comprehension to effort more than to ability. They

- believe they can understand if they apply the right comprehension strategies (Brown 2002).
- Stronger comprehenders use their background knowledge to identify or make connections among ideas in what they are reading (van den Broek and Kremer 2000).
 - Weak comprehenders may not recognize inconsistencies between what they read and their background knowledge. Instead, they may ignore or modify information in the text so they can hold on to their current understanding, even if it is incorrect (Beck and McKeown 2001).
 - Readers who ask themselves questions during or after reading are able to identify comprehension problems sooner and more accurately (Davey and McBride 1986).
 - Having students generate their own questions, combined with detailed, explicit instruction and sufficient opportunity to practice the strategy, increased their comprehension and the ability to recall what they'd read (Pressley and Woloshyn 1995).
 - Explaining what they've read to each other in their own words increases students' comprehension (Klingner, Vaughn, and Schumm 1998).
 - Teaching readers to draw visual displays to organize the ideas found in what they are reading helps them remember what they read and can produce stronger comprehension in subjects such as social studies and science (Armbruster, Anderson, and Meyer 1991).
 - Allington's (1983) study found that most of the time students should be reading texts they can decode with a very high level of accuracy to improve comprehension.
 - In addition, the National Reading Panel Report (NICHD 2000) recommends the following to help students comprehend:
 - Monitoring comprehension
 - Using cooperative learning
 - Using graphic and semantic organizers
 - Answering questions

- Generating questions
- Understanding story structure
- Summarizing
- Making use of prior knowledge
- Using mental imagery

Who Needs to Meet in Small Groups for Comprehension?

Every student can benefit from comprehension instruction. Essentially, every time I meet with a small group to read a text, comprehension is the ultimate goal. To scaffold them and help them be successful, I choose text where students have some basic comprehension.

Students who are good decoders but can't tell you what they've read need extra small-group instruction on how to comprehend. If you're using an assessment such as DRA or an informal reading inventory (IRI) and find the students decode on grade level but can't retell what they've read, those students need small-group work with comprehension, too. Likewise, if you're using an assessment like DIBELS that does a quick measure of comprehension, use that data to form groups with students low in retelling for extra work on comprehension.

Often overlooked are kids who have some basic comprehension but don't go any deeper with their thinking. These students will greatly benefit from small-group instruction with a focus on deeper comprehension, such as inferring.

Above-level readers can also learn to go deeper in their thinking in guided small-group lessons with a focus on comprehension. Work with them on determining importance in nonfiction, understanding humor and deeper plots in fiction, and building background knowledge when they read texts for which they have little schema. I prefer to help kids think more deeply, rather than to keep pushing them through higher and higher reading levels once they are reading on grade level.

I also use writing to help kids comprehend better. Once they can write fluently enough that it

Figure 4.2 Kindergarten children write responses to a book read the day before in small group.



doesn't interfere with their reading, I often have them use sticky notes or graphic organizers to record what they're thinking to help them retain those ideas. Sometimes we write a response together after reading. I find that this helps them interact with the text—like having a conversation with the book as they read it.

Possible Focus for Lessons

There are many possibilities from which you might choose a focus during a small-group lesson for comprehension. The National Reading Panel (NICHD 2000) researchers recommend the following kinds of comprehension strategy instruction to help readers become purposeful and active. Good readers use these steps, in combination, to make sense of text:

- **Understanding text structure.** This is often overlooked in nonfiction but overused as an isolated review, or a check, *after* reading in fiction. I like to teach students how to think about characters, setting, problem, solution, and beginning/middle/end of a story *before*

and *during* their reading, as well as *after*.

Likewise, teaching them how to identify non-fiction text structures, such as cause and effect, description, question and answer, and time order and sequence, can improve their comprehension of nonfiction.

- **Asking questions.** This comprehension strategy helps students learn to generate and ask inferential questions to propel their reading forward.
- **Answering questions.** It's important to teach kids to answer questions about the details and inferences of the text. I am careful to focus more on *thick* questions that require deeper thinking and have potentially layered responses rather than *thin* questions that require only one-word answers.
- **Summarizing.** This is tough, since it requires kids to first have basic comprehension and also determine which ideas are most important. Here, we focus on helping readers learn to identify and remember the main things from the text read.

While reading, students who use these steps improve their comprehension as they interact with the text:

- **Using schema/making use of prior knowledge.** This is often a good place to begin with comprehension instruction. Students make use of their personal experience and schema (background knowledge) to help them understand what they are reading. They often do this *before* reading as they preview the text as well as *during* their reading.
- **Visualizing/using mental imagery.** As they read, kids who best understand form vivid mental pictures. They often see, hear, taste, smell, and feel what's going on in the book. "I feel like I'm in the book with the characters" is how one third grader described this to me. Visualizing improves understanding and helps children remember what they read.

In addition, students can be taught the following to increase comprehension:

- **Monitoring.** It's important to learn to stop and reread when your mind wanders or meaning breaks down. Successful readers think about their thinking and are aware when it's not working so well.
- **Inference.** Many teachers throw up their hands in frustration on this one. Students can be taught to think through modeling and expecting that they can and will infer. I've found it helpful to build on their knowledge when teaching inference. When you can help kids connect what they know to what the text says, they can begin to infer.
- **Graphic organizers.** I like to use these as tools for thinking. When students have trouble comprehending, I often show them how to use graphic organizers as reminders and recording devices for what they're thinking. Graphic organizers can help to "hold" their thoughts while they're reading.
- **Deeper meaning.** This includes higher-level thinking, including generalizing, determining importance, synthesizing, and analyzing what was read. Use of quality questioning will help push kids' thinking deeper.

Figure 4.3 Third graders record their thinking on graphic organizers as they read to help them comprehend more deeply.



Figure 4.4 Sample graphic organizer.

Choosing Materials

I think it's important to include a variety of text, including fiction *and* nonfiction, for comprehension instruction in small group. This is a great place to expand students' reading interests. If you have students who always choose a certain type of book, you might stretch their horizons by guiding their reading of a different kind of book. For example, if they usually read books about animals, guide them into mysteries for a new experience. Children who comprehend over a wide variety of text are more proficient than readers of just one type of book.

I've found that choosing books based on students' interest and background knowledge improves their comprehension greatly. It's very difficult to comprehend something you're not interested in or know nothing about. Many of the struggling readers I've worked with have preferred nonfiction to fiction. So in small group, I often offer nonfiction—based on topics kids love, like animals or cars or volcanoes—to children who normally avoid reading like the plague.

If I mistakenly choose a text that is too hard, I tell the group that I didn't do a good job with book choice (trust me, they've done the same) and choose a slightly easier book so they'll experience success. If you know your students well—their reading levels, their interests, their stamina—this information will carry you far in choosing the best books

to use with them in small group. Remember to think about what they already know and build upon that to help them better comprehend.

❖ The Lessons ❖

Text Structure Lesson

Things to Think About

- The type of lesson described below can help students learn how to comprehend *nonfiction*. I like to first teach about various structures of nonfiction, such as question and answer, time order, description, cause and effect, and problem and solution during whole-group instruction. Then it is easier for students to apply that learning in small-group lessons like the one that follows.
- After reading books with these nonfiction text structures, you might teach students to write using the same structures.
- You might also teach lessons related to *story* structure with fiction books, focusing on characters; setting; beginning, middle, and end; or problem and solution, like the opening lesson in this chapter.

Before the Lesson

Miss Rodriguez teaches kindergarten. Today she will meet with a group of four children who are reading on level and progressing well. Instead of trying to push them through higher reading levels, she chooses to go deeper and help them with comprehension by teaching about text structure. The book she selects is *Who's Hiding?* by Rozanne Lanczak Williams. It has a question-and-answer format, which is an easy text structure for emergent readers to understand. Every other page has a question, followed by an answer on the following page. Miss Rodriguez knows the children will enjoy reading this nonfiction text, since they are interested in animals and the world around them. She takes a few minutes

to read through the book and jots down a simple lesson plan. (See Figure 4.6.) Having a plan will help her stick with her comprehension focus during the lesson. (A template for planning for comprehension in small group can be found in Appendix C.)

She plans to take notes on Ella and Piper as they read today, as well as anyone else should the need arise. So she takes an index card with each child's name on it and distributes these around the table to mark where each child will sit. She'll have the cards at her fingertips if she wants to write down anything particular she noticed the students doing as readers today. (See Chapter 2 for more ideas on organizing for note taking.)

During the Lesson

Miss Rodriguez calls Caden, Ella, Piper, and Max to a small round table while the rest of the children go to their literacy work stations. The four eagerly sit down at their appointed places, ready to read. Miss Rodriguez gives each of them a book bag filled with several familiar books, and they all choose a book and begin to read independently. This is part of their routine, and they know just what to do. She listens in to Ella read her book and takes a few notes about her reading on her card. Then she asks Ella to tell her a little about the book. Miss Rodriguez expects comprehension of her beginning readers.

Next, she tells the children they will be reading a new book today. She hands each a copy of *Who's Hiding?* She reads the title to them and leads a brief discussion about the cover. They talk about who's hiding (a fish) and who's after it (a shark). This leads to thinking about *why* the fish is hiding. The kids agree that it doesn't want to be eaten, and that the shark is much bigger than the little fish. Caden says it's like the book *Swimmy*, which Miss Rodriguez has read aloud to the class recently. The teacher smiles at his connection and says that *Swimmy* was helping the other fish hide, just like on this cover picture. Max, who loves animals and often watches nature shows, adds, "The shark is a predator. It wants to eat the little fish." Miss Rodriguez uses

Max's word and says, "You will be reading about several predators in this book. On each page an animal is hiding from another one. What other animals might hide from a predator like the little fish?" The children volunteer ideas—bugs hiding from snakes and birds, fish hiding from eagles, deer running away from cheetahs. They are very interested in this nonfiction topic and are ready to read.

Miss Rodriguez points to the word *Who's* on the cover and has the children run their fingers under it while reading it with her. She tells them it's going to be on many of the pages and means *who is*. She also tells them there will be a pattern in the book. One page will ask who's hiding from an animal, and the next page will tell the answer. It's a question-and-answer pattern and will help them read and understand the book. They look at the first two pages together, and she points out the punctuation and how it differs. Finally, Miss Rodriguez tells them to read and find out who's hiding from whom and think about why. She reminds them to make the pictures and the words match and make sense as they read.

Each child reads the little book aloud at his or her own pace. They don't read together in unison or take turns. Miss Rodriguez wants each of them to read it on their own. Because of her rich but brief book introduction, the children are confident and try to read the book as independently as possible. She moves around the table and listens in to individuals, prompting as needed. Piper reads, "Who's hiding from the bird?" Miss Rodriguez notices that Piper glances at the picture and then at the word for confirmation and praises this checking. "You looked at the picture and the word to make it match. Good checking." Piper beams and keeps going. "A c-a-t, cat. Cat? That's not a cat. It's a bug." Miss Rodriguez helps Piper look at this long word, *caterpillar*, and back at the picture. "Oh, it's a caterpillar," says Piper. "That makes sense." Her teacher listens to her reread this page and then moves to the next child. She jots down a note about Piper's reading on an index card. (See Figure 4.5 for her notes.)

Figure 4.5 Mrs. Rodriguez's anecdotal notes on Piper.

Piper	
11/30	- paying more attention to print
12/2	- really enjoying reading new books
12/7	- SC on <i>caterpillar</i> - said "cat" but checked picture & read through word - wow!

Miss Rodriguez continues to listen in to individuals, prompting and supporting each for just a minute or so. When some of the children finish early, she reminds them to read it again and read it so it sounds really interesting. She tells them to make it sound like a question when they read each question page.

They end the lesson with a brief but lively discussion about the animals and who was hiding from whom. They figure out that the hiding animals were usually smaller than the predators and that the animals lived in different environments, like the ocean and the woods. Miss Rodriguez praises them for checking the pictures and the words and making it make sense. They reread the book together one time, and Miss Rodriguez helps them raise their voices at the end of each question. They like this pattern and decide they'd like to write a question-and-answer book next time they meet.

After the Lesson

Miss Rodriguez collects the note cards and returns them to her small-group lesson-plan notebook while the four students she just met with move to their work stations. She also jots down a quick reflection about today's reading. Her children can read the management board for literacy work stations independently and know just where to go. It's on a nearby pocket chart. They find their names and read the icons telling them which station to

Figure 4.6 Lesson Plan for Text Structure

Lesson Plan for Text Structure

Group: Ella, Piper, Max, Caden

Focus: COMPREHENSION

monitoring schema asking?s visualizing inference
 summarizing text structure graphic organizers deeper meaning

Warm-Up: Familiar Rereading **Listen to:** Ella **Title:** *What's the Weather Like Today?*

Today's Book: *Who's Hiding?* by Rozanne Lanczak Williams **Level:** end of kindergarten/C

BEFORE READING

Genre: nonfiction

Book Intro:

- Read title to them. *On each page, an animal is hiding from another one. Look at the cover. Who's hiding? Why? What other animals might hide from each other for protection?*
- Point out *Who's* on the cover and discuss that it stands for *who is*. *Who's will be in the book a lot and will ask a question.*
- Tell that the book has a question-and-answer pattern. Show the punctuation.

Set Purpose for Reading:
Read to find out: *which animal is hiding from which. Why?*

DURING READING

Prompts:

- *What makes sense there? Check it.*
- *Use the picture. Does that match the word you read?*
- *You read a question. What will probably come next? (an answer)*

Notes: Piper

AFTER READING

Discuss:

- *Name an animal from the book that was hiding. Who did it hide from? Why?*
- *Discuss the pattern the writer used. How could we use this pattern to write? What could we write about next time using questions and answers?*

REFLECTION

Kids liked the Q/A format of this book. Write with this pattern next time. Use other animal names. Find other books with *who* in them (for large and small group). Make question words chart with class. Use in science, too.

move to next. Another group of children arrives at her small-group table, and she directs them to get out their books for familiar rereading.

At the bottom of her lesson plan (see Figure 4.6), Miss Rodriguez notes that they will write a question-and-answer book next time they meet.

She will also look for other books with *who* in them for both shared reading during whole-group time and small-group reading. Question words are tricky, but she knows her kindergartners are ready to start recognizing and using these in science as well as language arts. She'll make a list of question words with her class to use as an anchor chart during whole-group instruction. Then she'll move it to the writing station. Some of her students will probably begin to write question-and-answer books after she works with this in small group.

Monitoring Lesson

Things to Think About

- Monitoring means checking. Emergent readers often stop while reading. When they do this, I like to label their behavior by saying, "You stopped. Good checking. How can you help yourself?" Your goal is for them to learn to reread and fix it up.
- Monitoring lessons are good to use with students who decode well but don't pay much attention to what they're reading. They must learn to stop and think about if they've understood what they've read so far.
- Monitoring is often used in combination with other reading strategies, such as schema, as you'll see in this lesson.
- Once children can write so that others can read and understand what they've written, you might have them use sticky notes to jot down brief notes about what they're reading. This often helps them slow down and pay attention.

Before the Lesson

Mrs. Washington, a first-grade teacher, will meet with Jamaal, Reid, Tarik, and Bryson today in small group. They can decode, but they often don't monitor, or think about, their understanding of what they've read. So she chooses a book for which they have lots of background knowledge—*Families*, by

Margie Burton et al. These students all have families and know lots about them, and this should help their comprehension. It's hard to understand something you don't know much about.

As she plans the lesson (see Figure 4.7), Mrs. Washington decides to have this group use sticky notes to jot down their thinking as they read. Recently, she attended a workshop where this technique was shared, and she's eager to try it. She will limit the number of sticky notes to three each so they don't get hung up with just playing with them. Mrs. Washington has just modeled how to use sticky notes in whole-group instruction while she was reading aloud a book, so her students have seen how to use them to write down their thinking. She hopes that writing down some of their thinking will help them stop and think about what they're reading, rather than just decode the words.

During the Lesson

Mrs. Washington introduces the new book, *Families*, by reading the title and looking at the cover with her small group. She asks them what they already know about families, and they share a bit about their own. They tell about black and white and Chinese and Mexican families.

Their teacher tells them that as they read today she wants them to think about how the families in the books are *like* theirs. She gives them each three sticky notes and tells them to write down what they are thinking as they read. She reminds them not to just read the words but also to *think*. When they get to the end of a page, they should think about how this family is like theirs. They should write down ideas of how they're alike.

As they read on their own, Mrs. Washington listens in to individuals. They are doing great with both decoding and fluency. Comprehension is definitely where she needs to focus. She listens in to Reid. He reads, "There are many kinds of families. Some are small. Some families are big." He gets ready to turn the page. Mrs. Washington stops and

Figure 4.7 Lesson Plan for Monitoring Comprehension

❖ Lesson Plan for Monitoring Comprehension ❖

Group: Jamaal, Reid, Tarik, Bryson

Focus: COMPREHENSION

- monitoring schema asking?s visualizing inference
 summarizing text structure graphic organizers deeper meaning

Today's Book: *Families* by Margie Burton et al.

Level: mid-first grade/F

BEFORE READING

Genre: nonfiction

Book Intro:

- Read title. *What do you know about families? What words might you find in this book?*
- Give three sticky notes to each. *Write how your family is like those in the book as you read.*
- *Think while you read. If you don't remember what you just read, stop and reread.*

Set Purpose for Reading:

Read to find out: *how your family is like the families in the book.*

DURING READING

Prompts:

- *What does that make you think of?*
- *What did you find out?*
- *How is your family like that? Write it on a sticky note to help you remember.*
- *What can you do to remember what you just read? Yes, read it again and think.*

Notes: Reid and Tarik

AFTER READING

Discuss:

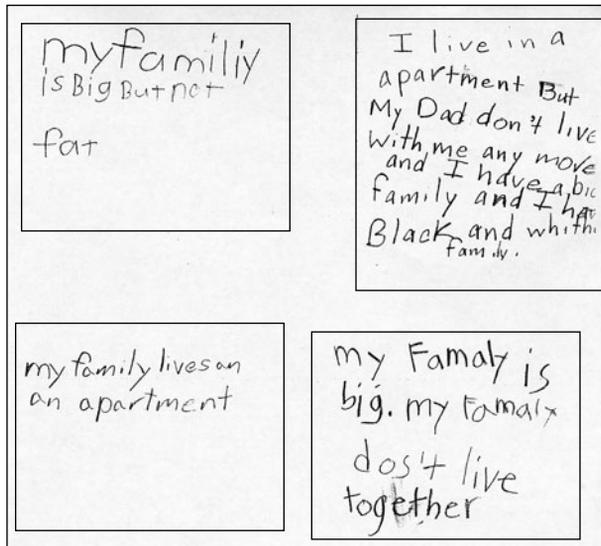
- *How is your family like one in the book? How is your family different?*
- *Did you stop and reread today? Where? How did it help you?*

REFLECTIONS

Using sticky notes helped them stop and think. Some reread. Try this again. Let them know it's okay to reread.

asks him how this is like his family. He tells her and then writes on his sticky note, "My family is big but not fat." She prompts others to write what they are thinking. They write things like, "My family lives in an apartment" and "My dad don't live with me any more and I have a big family." "My family dos't live

together." (See samples in Figure 4.8.) Mrs. Washington has to prod and remind them to jot down their connections. But they are successful and don't fuss about having to write. It seems as though these young readers realize this writing is helping them understand what they've read.

Figure 4.8 Kids' sticky note samples from *Families* lesson.

When their teacher ends the lesson by discussing how their families are like the families in the book, they have lots to share. Jotting down notes on the sticky notes helped them stop and monitor their thinking. Their comprehension improved greatly today. Mrs. Washington knows they will have to keep practicing this skill until it becomes automatic. Eventually, they won't need sticky notes to jot down their thinking.

After the Lesson

Mrs. Washington is pleased with how this lesson went. Her students needed quite a bit of prompting to stop and think, but they did so much better today and she is encouraged. Practice makes permanent. The children felt successful, which will help them to remember how thinking helped them understand. Writing on a sticky note engaged them, and Mrs. Washington will use this technique again next time. She'll also be sure to choose a book to which students can easily relate. This helped to improve comprehension as well.

Schema/Characters We Know Lesson

Things to Think About

- Books in a series work well for this type of lesson. Kids get to know the characters in one book and can connect their knowledge to the next.
- After you've guided the reading of one or two books in a series, many children will take off and read others on their own.
- Some books have the characters listed in the front of the book with a little sketch and each one's name. This is a great comprehension support. The *Woodland Mysteries* series from the Wright Group is an example of this type of text for students reading at the second-grade level or above.
- Reading books with fewer characters is easier than comprehending books with multiple characters.
- Schema relates not just to known characters but to anything kids know that can help them better understand what they are reading. The following lesson is just one example of a schema lesson. Schema is also referred to as *background knowledge*.

Figure 4.9 Before reading, the teacher introduces the new book and builds schema/prior knowledge for comprehension.



- Again, more than one reading strategy is employed. In the lesson that follows, children will use schema and a graphic organizer, as well as visualizing. However, the instructional focus will be on helping them use their schema.

Before the Lesson

Mrs. Davis teaches third grade. The group with which she'll be meeting includes students who enjoy chapter books but are reading slightly below grade level. She's decided to focus on helping them make connections, or use their schema, from text to text since they're starting to enjoy reading books in a series. If they can read this book with minimal support, she'll encourage them to read other books in the series during independent reading, which should improve their comprehension and reading stamina.

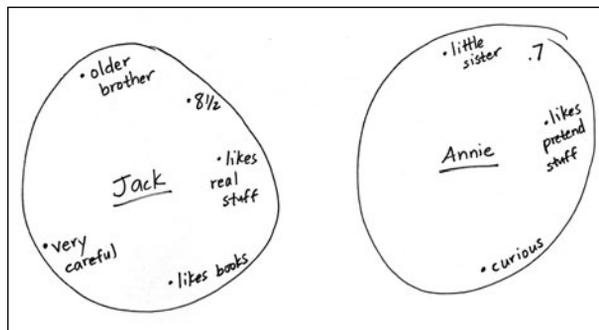
While listening to them read prior to today, Mrs. Davis has noted they are decoding well and starting to read with better fluency. They've been learning to read with different voices to match the characters in their books. The last book they read in small group was *Dinosaurs Before Dark* from the Magic Tree House series. So for today they will read another book in the series. As they read, Mrs. Davis will have them make a character map and think more deeply about what they know about the main characters who are in all these books, to better understand the story.

During the Lesson

When they come to the reading table, the children are excited to see that they'll be reading another Magic Tree House book. They enjoyed the last one they read in small group. They read the title, *Pirates Past Noon*, and tell what they already know and think will happen in this book. Mrs. Davis tells them they are using their *schema* to predict and infer. They have been learning how to do this in whole group, too, and they make the connection.

Then they work together to quickly fill out a character map about what they know about Jack

Figure 4.10 Teacher-made character map about Jack and Annie.



and Annie, the main characters in this series. (See Figure 4.10.) Mrs. Davis records their ideas and models how to make the map. Each child makes his or her own map to match. She draws a circle for each character and lists what they know about each inside the circle, showing their *schema* for the character. She tells them to use this as they read and check to see if the characters act the same way in this book. She also encourages them to jot down new information they get about each character as they read. They can write this on the outside of each circle to show that it is new information.

As they read the first two chapters silently, Mrs. Davis listens in to each read a bit aloud in a quiet voice. She listens for their fluency and decoding, and she prompts them as needed. She also asks them to tell if and how their schema for the characters matched what they already know. She has them jot down anything new they learn about either of the characters outside the circles on their maps.

They talk about the book when they are done reading. They discuss Jack and Annie and how they behaved. Ava says they acted just like she expected, and it really helped her understand. Andrew adds that he realized Jack likes to take notes and wrote that on his map. The rest of the kids agree and add it to theirs, too. Emily notes that this book was really easy for her to understand today, because she was thinking about what she already knew about the characters and could easily predict what would happen next.

Figure 4.11 Lesson Plan for Schema

❖ Lesson Plan for Schema ❖

Group: Emily, Ava, Joshua, Andrew, Ryan

Focus: COMPREHENSION

- monitoring schema asking?s visualizing inference
 summarizing text structure graphic organizers deeper meaning

Today's Book: *Pirates Past Noon* by Mary Pope Osborne

Level: end of second grade/M

BEFORE READING

Genre: fiction/fantasy

Book Intro:

- Read title and look at covers. What do they already know? Tell them to use their schema to think about what might happen in the book.
- As a small group, make a character map of what they already know about the main characters, Jack and Annie, before reading.

Set Purpose for Reading:

Read Chapters 1–2 to find out: *how Jack and Annie behave. Is it what you expected? How does it relate to the last book you read about them? Add to your character map.*

DURING READING

Prompts:

- *What are you learning about ____?*
- *Is this how you expected this character to act? Why or why not?*
- *What else have you found out about this character?*

Notes: Joshua

AFTER READING

Discuss:

- *How was this book like the other Magic Tree House book we read?*
- *How was it different?*
- *Share what you learned about Jack and Annie. Look at your character map. Did you learn anything else about them? What?*
- *How did your schema about the characters help you understand what you read today?*

REFLECTION

They did well with understanding both the characters and the beginning chapters of this book. Guide the reading of Chapters 3 and 4. Check in with Ryan and Andrew to be sure their understanding is deep enough.

After the Lesson

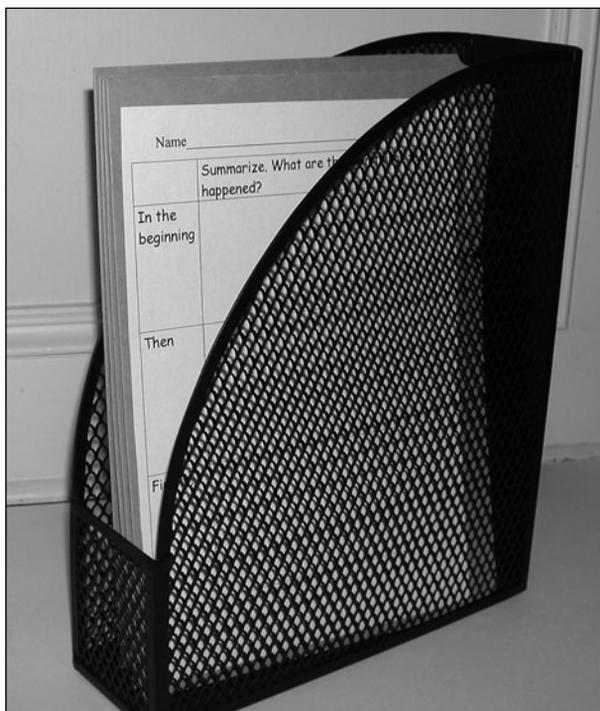
Mrs. Davis is delighted with the kids' responses to these first chapters of their new book. She decides to read a few more chapters with them in small group and then let them finish it on their own and discuss it in a literature circle format. She will guide the reading of two more chapters and then plan to release control to them to finish it. They are moving toward independence, which is her goal for them as readers, writers, and thinkers. She'll continue to have them use their character maps, adding any new information they find. It should help to guide their thinking.

Using Graphic Organizers Lesson

Things to Think About

- In this lesson, students will use one kind of graphic organizer, an annotated list, to keep track of multiple characters. You'll want to expose students to a variety of graphic organizers and teach them *how* to choose one that will help them better comprehend. For example, they might use a Venn diagram to compare and contrast information. But they might use a web to chart facts or ideas that focus on a particular topic.
- As you model with a graphic organizer in whole-class reading (through read-aloud or shared reading), you might place several laminated copies of that same organizer in a file box on your small-group table. Then as kids need a graphic organizer to help them keep track of their thinking in small group, let *them* choose the one they think best fits the information. They can use these to record their thinking on them with dry erase pens. And when finished, the sheets can be erased and reused. (See Figure 4.12.)
- I use graphic organizers as scaffolds to help kids remember and better comprehend what they're reading. Eventually, many of these may become permanent thinking structures in

Figure 4.12 Graphic organizers stored in a file box can be easily accessed during small group. Students learn to choose which organizer will help them think more clearly about their reading.



students' brains. As a proficient reader, I occasionally still use a graphic organizer to help me understand, especially when there are multiple, complex characters in a story, as in this lesson.

Before the Lesson

Mrs. Wu is planning to meet with a group of third graders who are above-level readers. She has noticed that many of them are reading books with multiple characters during independent reading time, and they sometimes get the characters confused. So she has selected a fourth-grade-level book called *Ten Kids, No Pets* by Ann M. Martin. She was very careful when searching for an above-grade-level text, because many books touch upon themes that she feels are too mature for her third graders. It's a delicate balance to find something more challenging *and* appropriate for her students. This book looks like fun and it is about a topic of great interest to

children their age—trying to persuade parents to get a pet.

Mrs. Wu fills out today's lesson plan (see Figure 4.14) and will begin by introducing the book and how to keep track of multiple characters. Most of the other students in her classroom don't need this strategy yet, so she'll introduce the graphic organizer only to this group for now. After she introduces the book and the strategy, she'll ask these five children to meet in a literature circle to discuss Chapter 1 after they read it independently today. To help guide their discussion, she types questions as listed on her plan, and will give each a copy to use to help them prepare for their literature circle or book club group.

During the Lesson

Mrs. Wu gathers Amelia, Jacqueline, Matt, Ryan, and Daniel around her small-group table and hands them the new book she's chosen for today. Often, she has the children choose from several books when meeting as a literature circle or book club. But today she has picked a particular book, since it has multiple characters and an interesting chapter structure (each chapter is the name of a character in the book).

The students quickly preview the text by reading the front and back covers, and begin to talk as a small group. "This looks like it will be good." "Ten kids. Wow! That would be cool to have a family like that." "I wonder if they'll get a pet. I bet they will." "This sounds kind of like a funny movie."

Mrs. Wu sits back and smiles as she listens to their talk. This group functions very independently, since its members all read above grade level and are used to having discussions about their reading. She directs their attention to the table of contents and talks with them about why it might be set up that way. The kids figure out that these are probably the ten kids and wonder about the eleventh name, since there are eleven chapters.

Then their teacher tells them that she's chosen this book because it has so many characters. She

asks them if they ever have trouble keeping up with all the characters in a book. Several share titles they've read and how they got confused with some of the characters. Mrs. Wu explains that this also happens to her as an adult reader, and she shows them how she sometimes keeps a character list to keep track of the people in a book. (See her list in Figure 4.13.) Recently, she read *Persian Pickle Club*, by Sandra Dallas, and used this strategy herself. The kids are somewhat amazed that even their teacher had to do this. It makes them more open to the idea, since most of them are used to reading with ease and don't normally have to respond to a reading challenge. They read a page together, and Mrs. Wu models how they might keep a character list for this book.

Then they return to their desks and read Chapter 1 independently. Mrs. Wu has given them each a list of discussion questions to guide their reading. They use it to prepare for the discussion. She has asked Amelia to lead the group talk today.

Figure 4.13 Teacher's character list from her personal reading.

<i>Persian Pickle Club</i> by Sandra Dallas	
• Rita	married to Tom - city slicker
• Agnes T. Ritter	single & miserable - Rita's sister-in-law
• Queenie Bean	main character & narrator - childless - married to Grover
• Mrs. Ritter	Rita's mother-in-law
• Opalina Dux	odd
• Ada June Zinn	married to Buck - good cook
• Septima Judd	drives old Packard - married to Prosper
• Ceres Root	
• Ella Crook	best quilter, small, single, lives alone - kind of a widow
• Ben Crook	left Ella in hard times - now found buried in field!
• Nettie Burgett	married to Forest Ann's brother, Tyrone
• Forest Ann	widow
• Rev. Olive	annoying
• Velma Burgett	Nettie's daughter - never attends - wild
• Lizzy Olive	not a member - preacher's wife - gossips

Figure 4.14 Lesson Plan for Using Graphic Organizers

❖ Lesson Plan for Using Graphic Organizers ❖

Group: Amelia, Jacqueline, Matt, Ryan, Daniel

Focus: COMPREHENSION

- monitoring schema asking?s visualizing inference
 summarizing text structure graphic organizers deeper meaning

Today's Book: *Ten Kids, No Pets* by Ann M. Martin

Level: fourth grade

BEFORE READING

Genre: humorous fiction

Book Intro:

- Read title and look at covers. Make predictions.
- Tell them this is a book with multiple characters. Ask them how they keep track of the characters when there are lots of them in a book. Show how to make a list of the main characters and jot down brief notes to keep them straight. *I often do this as a reader, but only when there are many characters and I get confused.*
- Look at how the chapters are organized. Each is titled with the name of a character. *Authors sometimes title chapters with characters' names to help you learn more about that character and his or her perspective.*

Set Purpose for Reading:

Read Chapter 1 to find out: *information about each main character. If you start to get confused, you might keep a character list and a few notes about each. You can refer to it as you need to. Read a bit with them and model how to do this. Give them discussion questions to think about as they read and to guide their conversation after they read.*

DURING READING

Prompts:

None with this group. They will read on their own during small-group time and then meet as a literature circle. They'll use the questions below, typed, for them to guide their discussion.

Notes: Amelia will lead the group discussion today.

AFTER READING

This group will meet independently as a literature circle to discuss the questions below. I'll listen in to their discussion today.

Discuss:

- *What did you learn about the characters?*
- *Did you ever get confused about the characters? Where? How did you keep them straight?*
- *Share your graphic organizer, if you made one, and tell how it helped you better understand what you read.*
- *Which character was most interesting to you? Why?*
- *Why do you think the author named the chapters after people? How might that help you better understand this book?*

REFLECTION

The character list worked well for most today. Check in with each of them this week during independent reading time and remind them to use this, as needed, to keep track of multiple characters in their books.

While they read, Mrs. Wu walks around the classroom, checking in on students at their literacy work stations. After a few minutes, she confers with individuals in her small group to see how their reading is going. Several are keeping a character list. But she notices that Ryan hasn't written anything down. When she asks him how his reading is going, he admits that he did okay at first, but then he started to get confused. He shows Mrs. Wu where he got mixed up. On page 13, there are suddenly neighbors coming to say good-bye. Mrs. Wu asks him what might help. He decides to go back and scan what he's read so far to make a character list. She stays with him for a moment for support, just in case he needs help. He does fine, so she moves on.

The students read for about fifteen minutes and then meet to discuss what they read today as a literature circle. They take their notes and their questions along back to the small-group table, sit in a circle, and discuss what they read. Often, literature circle groups meet on the floor without Mrs. Wu, but today she wants to observe and see how they're doing with keeping track of the characters.

Amelia begins to lead the discussion by asking, "What did you learn about the characters today?" Matt begins to share a bit about Abbie, also known as Abigail, like in the chapter title. Several kids share what they learned about this girl, the big sister. Daniel says that Abbie reminds him of his big sister, Renee. They talk about several of the other characters, too. Mrs. Wu intervenes after a while because she wonders whether they used a character list and whether it helped them keep track of the characters.

Ryan shares that at first he didn't think he needed a list, but then he got mixed up on page 13 and went back, scanned, and began a short list. He says it did help him. Others share their lists and they notice similarities and differences. Amelia asks if anyone had a favorite character, and they take turns sharing. Mrs. Wu thanks them for participating and sends them back to their desks after about fifteen minutes. It is time for the class to wrap up small-group and literacy work stations time.

After the Lesson

Mrs. Wu quickly jots down a note in the reflection space on her lesson plan. She is pleased with the way today's meeting went. Literature circles are working well with this group. Spending a few minutes with the group, in the *before*, *during*, and *after* reading segments today made sense. She'll have them continue reading a few more chapters and then check in with the group as they meet in a few days. She doesn't always meet with her literature circles; they often meet independently of her. But because she introduced a new strategy, she will check in with them next time, too.

Asking Questions Lesson

Things to Think About

- This type of lesson will help kids learn to stop and reflect on the questions that form in their minds as they read.
- I like to remind them that readers who ask questions keep their reading moving forward.
- I think it's important to focus on "real" questions that emerge during the reading, not just "test" questions that may appear on a standardized state assessment. Authentic questions help students see that they are responsible for their own comprehension. You'll want to ask students some "test-like" questions so they understand what these are asking on state assessments, but don't limit questioning to only this kind.

Before the Lesson

Mr. Miller plans to meet with five students who are reluctant readers in his urban second-grade class. They read slightly below grade level and often barely comprehend. He has been focusing on asking questions for several lessons with this group to help them better understand what they read. He has been modeling how to ask questions as a reader in whole-group instruction as well. The last time this group met, they began reading an informa-

Figure 4.15 Lesson Plan for Asking Questions

❖ Lesson Plan for Asking Questions ❖

Group: Michael, Hannah, Brianna, Joseph, Emma

Focus: COMPREHENSION

- monitoring schema asking?s visualizing inference
 summarizing text structure graphic organizers deeper meaning

Warm-Up: Familiar Rereading

Listen to: Emma

Title: *How Did This City Grow?*, pp. 1–9

Today's Book: *How Did This City Grow?* pages 10–end

Level: early second grade/1

BEFORE READING

Genre: nonfiction/informational text

Book Intro:

- Read title on page 10. *This is the question the author will answer in this section. Use the words and the photos and the captions.*
- *Continue to jot down questions you have as a reader. They'll help you keep reading. Try to find the answers. If they're not there, you might read other books to find your answers.*
- If they finish early, they might write captions for a photo in this section on a piece of white six-line correction tape placed under the photo.

Set Purpose for Reading:

Read to find out: *the answer to the question in the title, How did this city grow?*

DURING READING

Prompts:

- *What questions are you thinking about as you read?*
- *Did the author answer your question? What did you learn?*
- *What questions do you still have?*

Notes: Brianna

AFTER READING

Discuss:

- *How did this city grow?*
- *What questions did you have? How were they answered?*
- *What do you still want to know?*
- *How did asking questions help you understand what you read?*

REFLECTION

Some of the kids had more questions than others. They can use more practice. Try a mystery next. This genre will naturally lead them to ask questions. Get books on the inventions, including cars.

tional text, *How Did This City Grow?* They live in a city, and they enjoyed the start of the book.

During the Lesson

Michael, Hannah, Brianna, Joseph, and Emma meet with Mr. Miller at a small table located where their teacher can easily peruse the room. They take a few minutes to reread the first half of the book, which they read yesterday. This will help their fluency and their comprehension. Before they begin to reread, Mr. Miller asks, “What question were we trying to answer yesterday as we read?” The students look at the contents page and tell him, “How did this city start?” It’s the title of the first part. They all reread silently while Mr. Miller listens to Emma read a bit quietly to him. He asks her about what she read, and she tells him how this city was built in the middle of the state, is near lots of water for drinking and transportation, and had a railroad, which brought many people there. He asks her if she has any questions. She says, “I wonder how they got all the stuff to make the buildings. Who built them?”

Before the group reads the rest of the book, Mr. Miller reminds the students that yesterday they were focusing on questions readers ask as they read. He has Emma share some of hers. They talk a bit about possible answers to her questions. Then they read the title of the next part, “How Did This City Grow?” They briefly make predictions. Mr. Miller gives each of them several small sticky notes and tells them that as they read, they may have questions. These questions are good, because they help direct the reader forward. He encourages them to jot down questions on sticky notes as they read. He reminds them that their questions will help them to keep on reading. He also tells them to find out the answer to the question in the title.

As the children read, Mr. Miller listens in briefly to as many as possible for the next few minutes and looks over their questions jotted on their sticky notes. They are doing fairly well. They like the sticky notes, and he is pretty sure their questions are helping them think more about the text.

After reading, they share what they found out about how the city grew. They also share the questions they had while reading—*What kinds of jobs did they get? When were cars invented? Why were the roads not good?* They discuss some answers to their questions. Some of them decide to do further research to learn about when cars were invented.

After the Lesson

Mr. Miller reflects on how the kids handled the reading of this book. They had good comprehension, and jotting down their questions seemed to help them be more thoughtful. He’s pleased that some of them wanted to read more to find out about the invention of cars. He plans to go to the library and find some books about early cars and a few about other inventions as well. Then he’ll look for another book where questions will naturally propel these readers forward. Perhaps a mystery is a good choice, so he’ll visit his school’s leveled-book library after school.

Visualizing and Vocabulary Lesson

Things to Think About

- As students move to higher reading levels, they will need to visualize more. But don’t wait until there are no pictures to teach them to visualize. A few pictures can still help them visualize, especially if the topic is somewhat unfamiliar.
- I’ve found it helpful to teach children to visualize in whole-group instruction before moving them into doing this more independently in small group. Having them do a quick sketch of what they picture can help them stay engaged with the task.
- You’ll want to consider vocabulary when helping students visualize. I like to remind students that many times they’ll have to reread and think about meanings of specific words to clarify their pictures.

Figure 4.16 Lesson Plan for Visualizing

❖ Lesson Plan for Visualizing ❖

Group: Kyla, Rachel, Jared, Isaiah, Jack, Gabriel

Focus: COMPREHENSION

- monitoring schema asking?s visualizing inference
 summarizing text structure graphic organizers deeper meaning

Today's Book: *One Day in the Alpine Tundra* by Jean Craighead George **Level:** end of third grade/P

BEFORE READING

Genre: fiction/nature writing/diary

Book Intro:

- Read covers. Ask where the alpine tundra is and what lives there.
- *This is written like a diary by a boy in the Wyoming mountains. What do you think it's like there?*
- *Read Chapter 1 and visualize what it's like there. Pay attention to the details and you'll have a clearer, more detailed picture as you read. This will help you better comprehend. There will be lots of new words. Mark new words with highlighter tape and try to figure out what they mean. Use the pictures in the book and the words around them.*
- Read the first paragraph together and model this.

Set Purpose for Reading:

Read to find out: *what it's like in the alpine tundra. Pay attention to new words.*

DURING READING

Prompts:

- *What are you picturing?*
- *Which words best helped you visualize?*
- *What else do you see?*
- *What do you think that word means? What can help you?*

Notes: Jared and Isaiah

AFTER READING

Discuss:

- *What was it like in the alpine tundra?*
- *What details did you picture?*
- Discuss new words and what they mean.

REFLECTION

This text was challenging for some due to many new words and limited background knowledge. Look for a short video clip on the alpine tundra to show next time we meet.

Before the Lesson

Ms. House teaches third grade. She is working with a group of students who are reading solidly on grade level, and she wants to take their thinking deeper. So she has chosen a new book, *One Day in the Alpine Tundra*, by Jean Craighead George. They have been learning about habitats in science, and this will fit nicely. She isn't always able to make what they read in small groups match what they're studying in content areas, but occasionally, like today, it does, and she is pleased.

Ms. House reads the first few chapters and decides this will be a perfect book to help students use visualizing as a comprehension strategy. She notes there are many new words, so she'll be sure they pay attention to the vocabulary to help them visualize. (Note her lesson plan in Figure 4.16.)

During the Lesson

Following her plan, they read the book covers (front and back) and discuss what an alpine tundra is. They quickly make connections to what they're studying in science, using their schema. As students become more proficient, they learn to integrate comprehension strategies as they read. She briefly introduces the book, telling them it's a diary written by a boy in the Wyoming mountains, and tells them to practice visualizing and adding to their schema as they read. She reminds them to pay attention to the details and the new vocabulary to help them create a clear picture.

After modeling how to do this by reading the first paragraph together, she has the children read silently on their own. She listens to individuals read a bit and talks with each about his or her picture and its details. She prompts as needed, using some of the questions she's written on her plan.

Following their silent reading, they talk as a small group about what they pictured and understood. There are quite a few new words they came across, and they discuss what these meant and how this changed their mental picture. They are eager to read more about the alpine tundra.

Figure 4.17 A third-grade teacher listens in to individuals read a bit and checks their comprehension, too.



After the Lesson

Ms. House jots down a brief reflection about the lesson on her plan. The group did fairly well, but their schema for the alpine tundra is limited. She decides to look online for a video clip about this habitat. Her school subscribes to unitedstreaming.com, so she should be able to access a short clip about the alpine tundra that will really help her kids' comprehension. In addition, she'll find a few books from the school library that she'll show the group next time they meet. If they're interested, she'll add these to her classroom library for browsing during work stations time.

How Do I Assess/Check for Comprehension?

I have found that the best way to find out if students comprehend what they read is to talk with them. Having a conversation about what they read gives me valuable information about the depth of their understanding. I ask questions, as needed, to help them go deeper, but I try to avoid turning it into a question-and-answer session. That often

makes kids rely on me to ask questions. The more they talk, the more I learn. From my work with many teachers and children, I've learned that struggling comprehenders often learn to sit back and let the teacher do all the talking. Often, in desperation, teachers simply tell students (rather than wait patiently for students to tell them) and thus, students learn that if they just sit there quietly their teachers will do the work for them.

Another way I check students' comprehension is to look at any notes they recorded while reading. If you had them jot down thoughts on sticky notes, you can look at these. Or if you had them use a graphic organizer, look at what they wrote there. Simply collect these at the end of small-group time and take a glance at them.

Some teachers feel comfortable only if they've used a formal, objective comprehension measure, such as a multiple-choice format, after students read. This is very time-consuming and isn't always available to accompany *everything* students read. You might use these periodically, but don't be fooled into thinking that you can teach a story from your core program all week, then give the kids a multiple-choice worksheet on it and totally assess their comprehension that way. By the time they do the worksheet, they've already "learned" the story and may test out higher in comprehension than they actually are. In this case, it would probably be better to give them a worksheet with an on-grade-level passage and comprehension questions that you haven't already "taught with." And see how they do independently. This will give you a better picture of their reading comprehension of on-grade-level text. What if they're reading below grade level? Then they shouldn't score very well, because they can't read on that level. The grade will reflect it.

Other teachers use a retelling rubric to assess comprehension. An excellent one is included with the DRA. Some school systems create their own comprehension rubrics. There are professional books available with rubrics, such as Linda Hoyt's

Revisit, Reflect, Retell: Strategies for Improving Reading Comprehension (1999) and *Make It Real: Strategies for Success with Informational Texts* (2002). Vicki Benson and Carrice Cummins' *The Power of Retelling: Developmental Steps for Building Comprehension* (2000) also includes retelling rubrics.

What to Look For and How to Take Notes on Comprehension

Along with measures such as the ones mentioned above, you might find it helpful to take anecdotal notes on comprehension. Some things you might look for are described in Figure 4.18.

Some Prompts for Comprehension

I've found that when a reader gets stuck, it's helpful to have some things to say to help prompt the child to take action (rather than my just giving him the word or the answer). See Figure 4.19 for some examples of what you might say to help a child think and do the comprehension work.

Links to Whole-Group Instruction

I have found that my small-group lessons move faster when I link what I do there to lessons previously taught in whole group. For example, if I want kids to write on sticky notes to record their thinking while reading, I model that strategy in whole group before ever expecting kids to apply it in small group.

If you want kids to make connections to what they're reading, show them how to do this in whole group. You can use a read-aloud book and pause briefly to show them places where you make connections to the text. Don't overdo it, though. When working with younger children, I sometimes put my hand on my head to show that this is what I'm thinking (and not what the book says).

Figure 4.18 Aspects of comprehension and what to look for when taking anecdotal notes.

Aspect of Comprehension	What to Record/Look for	Sample Notes You Might Take
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ monitoring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Note if the child is rereading or self-correcting (noted as SC) when meaning breaks down. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ SC several times to make sense ■ <i>waffle /SC waddle</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ using schema/making connections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Look for meaningful connections and jot down what the child said. ■ Or save his sticky notes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>I know someone just like that character, so I know exactly how he felt.</i> ■ <i>That's where I live. I've seen that place.</i> ■ makes simple connections, but they don't help with understanding
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ asking questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Notice if the child questions and if the questions propel the reader forward. Again, post the child's sticky notes onto your note card. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ asks thoughtful questions ■ needs help with asking questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ visualizing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Have the child tell what he can see in his head, especially when there are limited or no pictures. ■ Store a child's sketch with your notes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ vivid pictures ■ needs help with visualizing ■ told me he had a movie in his mind and described what he saw today
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ inference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Note deeper meaning, rather than surface understanding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ still having trouble with this—isn't making connections ■ relies only on background knowledge, not the text ■ is inferring well
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ summarizing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Think about whether the child tells what the text was mostly about, rather than lots of little details. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ too many details—parts, not the whole ■ summarizes using most important parts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ using text structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Look for whether the student understands and can explain how the text works. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ identifies and recognizes text structures like descriptions in nonfiction (NF) ■ needs work on identifying and using text structure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ using graphic organizers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Look at what the child records and see whether it is on target. Save a representative sample. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ using graphic organizer for story helped comprehension ■ missing key information—keep trying
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ deeper meaning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Record comments and questions from kids that show evidence of deeper thinking. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ starting to think more deeply ■ surface understanding

If you want kids to use sticky notes to record their connections, model this in whole group, too. Show them how you jot down a thought on

your sticky note, and be explicit about how you place it in the book so it sticks out and you can find it easily after you're done reading. *Strategies*

Figure 4.19 Prompts to Help Students Self-Monitor Comprehension

What Child Is Having Trouble With	Possible Teacher Prompts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ monitoring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>You stopped. Is it making sense?</i> ■ <i>What have you read about so far?</i> ■ <i>Rereading is smart. When you don't understand what you've read, go back and read it again.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ using schema/making connections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>What does that make you think about/remind you of? How does that help you understand what you're reading?</i> ■ <i>What do you already know about ____? How can that help you?</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ asking questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>What are you wondering about as you read?</i> ■ <i>What questions do you have?</i> ■ <i>Did the author answer any of your questions? Where?</i> ■ <i>What questions do you still have?</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ visualizing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>What are you picturing? What do you see/hear/smell/feel as you read this?</i> ■ <i>Which part helped you see something more clearly?</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ inference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>What might happen next? What else might you find out?</i> ■ <i>Why do you think . . . ?</i> ■ <i>Join together what you know with what the words say. What are you thinking now?</i> ■ <i>What does the author mean? How did you figure that out?</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ summarizing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>If you wanted to tell a friend about what you just read, what would you say? Don't give away the whole thing. Just tell what it was mostly about.</i> ■ <i>What are the most important parts?</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ using text structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>What kind of structure did this author use? question/answer . . . problem/solution . . . compare and contrast . . . time order</i> ■ <i>How can that help you understand what you're reading?</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ using graphic organizers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>What kind of graphic organizer might help you better understand what you're reading? How could that help you?</i> ■ <i>Try a graphic organizer that might help you think about what you're reading and help to organize your thoughts.</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ deeper meaning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ <i>Why? What else are you thinking?</i> ■ <i>How could that have happened?</i> ■ <i>Tell me more.</i>

That Work (Harvey and Goudvis 2000) and *Reading with Meaning* (Miller 2002) both include practical ideas on teaching comprehension to primary students, especially in whole-group instruction.

Here are some ideas of how to model comprehension strategies in whole-group instruction. There are also sample lesson plans for whole-group comprehension instruction in Appendix C for your reference.

Monitoring

- As you read aloud, stop occasionally and have kids check for understanding by talking with a partner about what they understand so far.
- Model how to read a section, or a page, and stop and think about what you read using picture books, Big Books, poems stanza by stanza, chapter books, and textbooks.
- When you make an error and self-correct while reading aloud, point it out to kids and tell them you're monitoring or fixing it up to make it make sense.

Using Schema/Making Connections

- Share some of your connections as you read aloud, but don't stop on every page and overdo this one.
- You might jot some of your connections on sticky notes to model how to do this.
- Explain how your connections help you better understand what you've read (see sample whole-group lesson plan in Appendix C).

Asking Questions

- Model how you ask questions about what will happen next, who a character is, what a word meant, what just happened, etc., during read-aloud.
- Again, you might show how you jot down your questions on sticky notes to make you aware of your thinking.
- Write question marks on sticky notes and post them on the page where it made you ask a question as you work with a text in shared reading; then remove the question mark when the question is answered.
- Focus on *thick* questions, or ones with multi-layered response possibilities, rather than *thin* (one-word-answer) questions.

Visualizing

- You might do a quick sketch on the board to show what you're visualizing as you read a

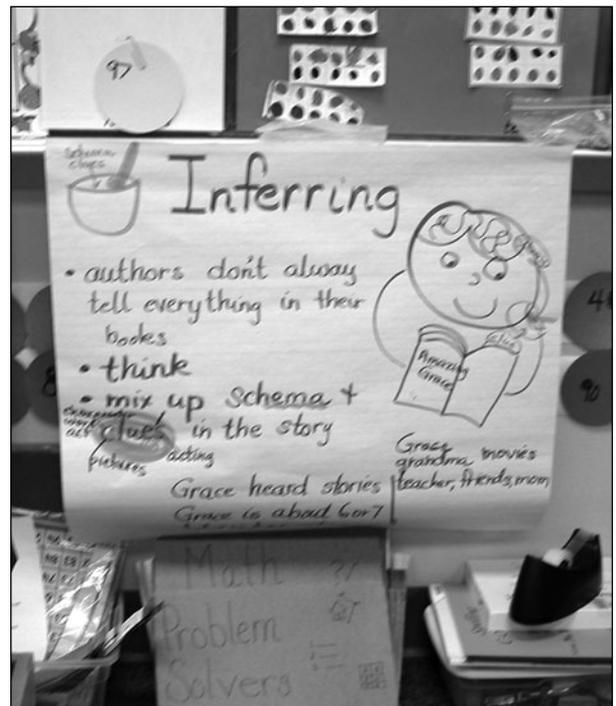
book aloud (or have kids do this and then share their sketches with each other).

- Or read aloud a page or two from a picture book, have kids close their eyes and think about the picture in their minds, and then show the pictures to see whether it's what the illustrator pictured.
- Use poetry to teach visualizing; it's short and often not illustrated. Highlight words that help paint a visual image while doing shared reading (see the sample whole-group lesson plan in Appendix C).

Inference

- I often make a chart showing that inference is a combination of background knowledge/schema and what the words (or pictures if there are no words) say (see Figure 4.20).
- Ask kids to infer using pictures with no words; show them they used what they know plus the clues from the picture.

Figure 4.20 Anchor chart made with students helps them understand how to infer.



- Even young kids can infer from oral examples related to things they know. (*Meg has a new puppy. She leaves the front door open. What do you think might happen?*)
- Model how to infer and name it inferring when kids help you do so. (*Sam, you're inferring. It didn't say that in the book, but you figured it out using what you know plus the words.*)

Summarizing

- Start with read-aloud books and write summaries together in shared writing to model this process (see the sample lesson plan in Appendix C).
- Tell kids to practice telling what happened in the story by pretending they're talking to someone who hasn't read the book and doesn't want to know all the details because he wants to read it.
- Sometimes we break down summarizing by telling a sentence about what the beginning was about, a sentence about what the middle was mostly about, and a sentence about the ending.

Using Text Structure

- Show kids how both fiction *and* nonfiction work by charting with students what each may include (see Pam House's sample charts in Figure 4.21).
- As you model how to read informational text in read-aloud and shared reading, add to a chart of nonfiction text features and text structures, as shown in Patty Terry's first-grade anchor chart (see Figure 4.22).

Using Graphic Organizers

- Model how to fill out graphic organizers as you read aloud fiction and nonfiction.
- Think aloud about why you use a particular graphic organizer. (*I'll use a web, since this piece has facts about a particular topic. I'll use a Venn diagram to chart what I'm learning, because this*

Figure 4.21 Charts made with students about how to read fiction and nonfiction during whole-group instruction.



Figure 4.22 A nonfiction-text-features chart, made over time with students during whole-group instruction, can be referred to during small group, too.

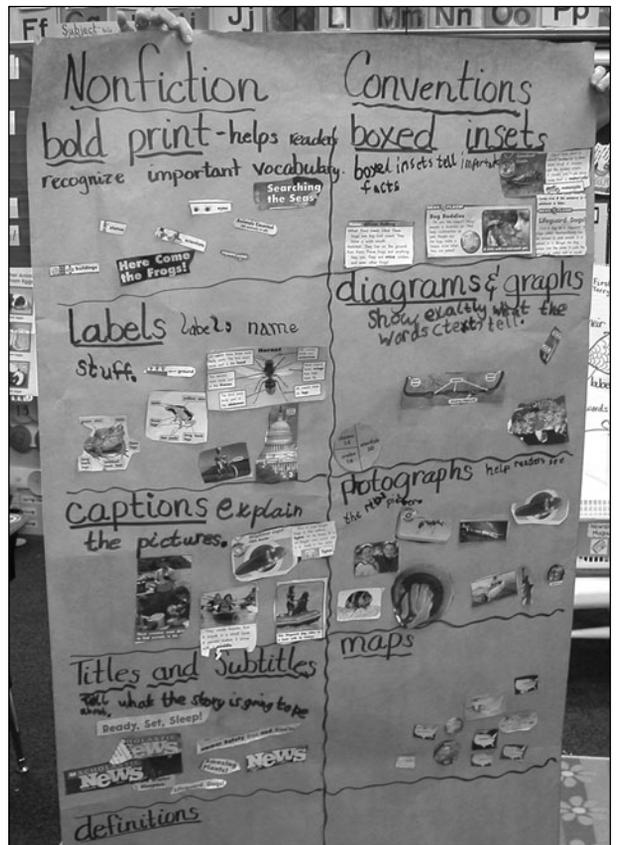


Figure 4.23 Deep Thinking Questions

- What did I learn from reading this that the book didn't even say?
- What's the most important thing I read? Why is that important?
- What was interesting? What was important?
- What might I try that I learned from reading this?
- What else did this book make me think about?
- Why did the author say that? Why did the author use those words?

article compares reptiles and amphibians. I'll use a character map to help me better understand how each main character acts in this story.)

Deeper Meaning

- Model how to think at a deeper level, including generalizing, determining importance, synthesizing, and analyzing what was read using quality literature with themes that provoke thinking.
- Use quality questioning to push kids' thinking deeper (you might post questions for kids to help them think more deeply—see Figure 4.23).

Links to Literacy Work Stations Practice

After modeling comprehension lessons in whole group and having students practice applying these in small groups, I've found success giving them additional practice with comprehension at literacy work stations. Figure 4.24 describes some stations for students to go to where they'll be practicing comprehension.

Links to Standardized and State Testing

Most state reading tests evaluate students' reading comprehension. Generally, these tests don't just

focus on basic comprehension. They extend to deeper thinking, especially questions that involve inference.

I've found that learning the academic language used in tests can help some children comprehend better on those tests. For example, if a test question says, *What's the best summary of this piece?* and students don't know what *summary* means, they will not have a very good chance of answering correctly. For this reason, I often structure the questions I ask when discussing a story to sound like the way they might be asked on a test. This helps to familiarize students with the terminology they will encounter in tests.

If your state posts release tests or samples of questions, use these to help prepare your students for the kinds of thinking they'll need to do when they take these tests. Having taught in Texas for almost thirty years through the TABS, TEAMS, TAAS, and TAKS tests, I am very familiar with how the language and rigor of our test has changed over the past years. I make it my business to know what the most recent tests have included, since these are posted on our state department website, and I use the test "question stems" with kids at all grade levels, including kindergartners (as appropriate). I believe that even if you don't teach a grade that's "tested," you should be aware of and use that academic language with your students orally. There's much we can do as primary teachers to help support intermediate teachers who are responsible for giving these tests.

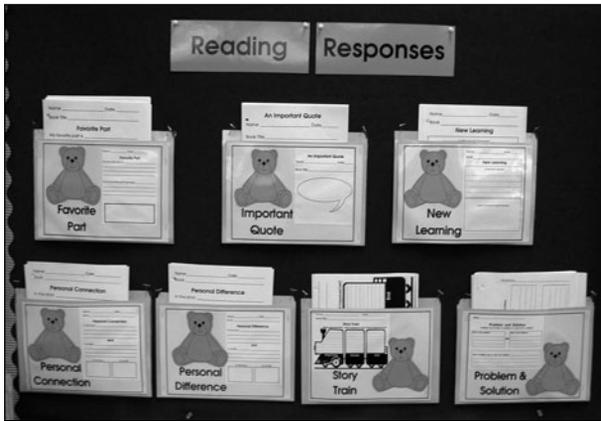
Comprehension Cautions

I'm careful not to focus *all* my attention on comprehension. It is certainly very important and rather tempting at times. In fact, it's the goal of reading. But if kids can't decode, their comprehension will suffer. Reading fluency must also be considered, since this has been shown to increase comprehension. And vocabulary has a huge influence on students' comprehension. As their reading levels

Figure 4.24 Literacy work stations that support comprehension.

Literacy Work Station	What Kids Do Here to Practice Comprehension	How This Station Supports Comprehension
Classroom Library	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Choose just-right books for independent reading. ■ Talk about books read with others. ■ Recommend books to each other. ■ Use graphic organizers/questions for discussion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Setting up a library with your kids can help them choose the right books. Talking about books and responding to them with others increases comprehension.
Listening Work Station	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Listen to and comprehend a recorded story, informational piece, or poem. ■ Talk with others about what they heard. ■ Interact with what they heard by writing personal responses. ■ Use graphic organizers to help them understand. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Listening comprehension is an easier task than reading comprehension. Listening to a book frees up the brain to think about the text, rather than having to decode every bit. Adding responses to listening helps kids interact with what they've heard, which improves comprehension (especially if the teacher has taught students how to think about text).
Buddy Reading Work Station	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Read a bit at a time together and talk about it. ■ Help each other as they read, especially to figure out the meaning if and when comprehension breaks down. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Buddy reading promotes working with a partner to figure out new words and comprehend. Reading a bit at a time and then talking about it helps readers monitor and fix up their comprehension.
Poetry Work Station	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Illustrate a poem. ■ Read a poem and think about the picture in your mind. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Illustrating a poem helps students visualize, which is a helpful comprehension strategy. Poems are short and are often fun, which makes them more appealing to struggling readers to try to comprehend.
Drama Work Station	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Retell a story or informational piece to demonstrate understanding. ■ Act out what was read to deepen understanding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ If you can dramatize what you've read, you're demonstrating understanding. It helps passive readers become more active.
Big Book Work Station	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Dramatize the Big Book while reading. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ See above.
Writing Work Station	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Write a response to a piece read aloud in class. ■ Write book reviews or letters of recommendation to friends about what they've read. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Writing clarifies thinking, and comprehension is thinking. Reading what others have written about books they've read often prompts kids to read these books, too.
Computer Work Station	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Answer questions about books they've read. ■ Use software programs like Kidspiration to demonstrate understanding through graphic organizers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The computer often gives immediate feedback, which can give encouragement to students who are struggling with comprehension.

Figure 4.25 Graphic organizers are posted and used at a variety of literacy work stations to aid students with comprehension.



increase, vocabulary becomes more and more important to comprehension. In fact, I often focus on comprehension and vocabulary simultaneously.

I never settle for basic comprehension. I don't ask *thin* questions, ones with one-word answers. You can push your kids' thinking deeper by expecting them to come up with more. Ask good questions, *thick* ones with multilayered possibilities, especially questions that include the words *why*, *what made you think of that*, and *how do you know*. And help students pay attention to new vocabulary and what those words mean.

Reflection Questions for Professional Conversations

1. What have you learned about teaching comprehension that you'll try in the next few weeks?
2. Who comprehends well in your classroom? How can you help them think even more deeply?
3. Who is struggling with comprehension? What can you try that will support their taking more ownership for their understanding?
4. Which elements of teaching comprehension have you taught well? What could you focus on more?
5. How are you using writing to help students comprehend? What else might you try to link reading and writing and deepen comprehension?
6. How do you see vocabulary affecting your students' comprehension? Refer to Chapter 8, on vocabulary, for more ideas.

For Further Information on Teaching Comprehension

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