
SECTION 4



Comprehension Lesson Formats

Guiding Principles of Teaching Reading Comprehension



What has research told us about teaching comprehension? Actually, so much is known that it may seem a little presumptuous to reduce it to a few principles. Nonetheless, it is useful to consider a few of the main findings and to make sure that our teaching strategies embody them. Here are some of the most important lessons:

- ◆ *Be mindful of the difference between improving general comprehension ability and improving comprehension of a specific selection.* For example, a science teacher may be more concerned with students' comprehending a textbook chapter than with developing their overall comprehension ability. These are different goals, to be sure, though many teaching strategies will lead to both.

- *Preteach key terms to improve comprehension.* Is this a comprehension or a vocabulary principle? Both! We revisit it here as a reminder that important terms should be introduced prior to reading in order to assist comprehension. Even if some of the terms are already familiar to the students, introducing them serves to activate prior knowledge.

- *Build background thoroughly before your students read.* Preteaching key terms is one way, but you will need to find additional ways as well. Providing pictures, diagrams, audiovisuals, factual information, demonstrations, physical props, and discussions of personal experiences your students may have had are just a few possibilities. Remember: It is almost impossible to underestimate the background of some of your struggling readers.

- *Make sure your students' attention is focused as they read.* Providing students with specific purposes for reading will improve comprehension. For example, you may decide to pose questions or provide charts or diagrams to be completed. You may instead ask students to form their own hypotheses or to decide what they themselves wish to learn. There are few restrictions on effective purpose-setting activities.

- *Use activities that cause students to transform information.* By asking students to use the information they find in sentences and paragraphs to complete charts, build diagrams, write summaries, or engage in similar tasks, they must process and understand what they read. This leads to real comprehension.

- *Be cautious about subskill approaches.* Skill-by-skill programs, such as those embodied in a basal reader series, can be useful for organizing instruction, but there is a danger that they can dominate your program and lead to a complacent reliance on worksheets or computerized activities to get the job done.

- *Model comprehension strategies.* Many struggling readers need to be shown how to apply effective strategies. Teachers can model these in class sessions in many ways. A few of these include using think-alouds during discussions, completing reading guides on transparencies, and clustering questions to demonstrate how to answer higher-level questions.

- *Find ways to integrate writing and reading.* Research underscores the important link between these processes. Reading and writing may seem like opposites, but both are *constructive* actions, used by literate people to build meaning. Appropriate activities can involve writing *during* reading (e.g., completing reading guides) or *after* reading (e.g., writing summaries or personal responses).

- *Aim for higher levels of comprehension.* The natural tendency to ask mostly literal-level questions must be resisted. Such questions have their place, to be sure, but unless inferences and critical judgments are included in classroom activities, comprehension may be superficial and inadequate.

READ MORE ABOUT IT



Nagy, William E. (1988). *Teaching vocabulary to improve reading comprehension*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Readence, John E., Moore, David W., and Rickelman, Robert J. (2000). *Prereading activities for content area reading and learning* (3rd ed.). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Directed Reading Activity



The Directed Reading Activity (DRA) is perhaps the oldest systematic method for introducing a reading selection and following it with meaningful activities. Its steps are simple to follow and allow ample room for creative planning.

- Step 1. Develop readiness for the reading selection. Try to anticipate deficiencies in prior knowledge of the content and then shore them up by introducing vocabulary, providing factual information, offering visual aids, etc.
- Step 2. Set purposes for reading. Such purposes might include reading to answer specific questions, to complete a chart, to reach a conclusion, draw a picture, complete a reading guide, or test a hypothesis. Combinations of these approaches are often possible.
- Step 3. Allow students to read the selection. This should be an active process since students now have specific purposes on which to focus while they read.
- Step 4. Lead a discussion of the reading selection. The framework of this discussion will be the purpose setting of Step 2, but additional questions are a natural extension.
- Step 5. Provide extension or reinforcement activities. These can take many forms and could focus on word recognition, comprehension, or personal responses to content.

The DRA is an extraordinarily flexible lesson format. It can be used with fiction or nonfiction, and the time devoted to each step can be adjusted as appropriate. Some teachers believe that the DRA is too teacher centered, though others view this characteristic as a plus.

READ MORE ABOUT IT



Tierney, Robert J., and Readence, John E. (2000). *Reading strategies and practices: A compendium* (5th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Directed Reading–Thinking Activity



The Directed Reading–Thinking Activity (DR-TA) is a reading strategy used to introduce a reading selection and to encourage students to form predictions as a means of making their reading more purposeful. It was proposed by Stauffer (1980) as an alternative to the DRA, one that places the responsibility for setting purposes on the students. Doing so, he claimed, would make them more purposeful readers. The steps of a DR-TA are simple to plan. The first and last steps are identical to those of the DRA.

- Step 1. Develop readiness for the reading selection. Try to anticipate deficiencies in prior knowledge of the content and then shore them up by introducing vocabulary, providing factual information, offering visual aids, etc.
- Step 2. Ask the students to read to a key point and then stop. They are then to form predictions about how the story will end. These predictions may be generated individually or by collaborative groups.
- Step 3. Permit the students to read the remainder of the story for the purpose of testing their predictions.
- Step 4. Lead a discussion, focusing on the predictions students have made. Were they right or wrong? Why?
- Step 5. Provide extension or reinforcement activities. These can take many forms and could focus on word recognition, comprehension, or personal responses to content.

The DR-TA lacks some of the flexibility of the DRA. It can be used only with materials that lend themselves to making predictions, and this usually means fiction or narrative nonfiction. It would not be suitable for most textbook selections. On the other hand, the DR-TA is less teacher centered than the DRA, and research evidence of its effectiveness is convincing.

READ MORE ABOUT IT



- Stauffer, Russell. (1980). *The language experience approach to the teaching of reading* (2nd ed.). New York: Harper & Row.
- Tierney, Robert J., and Readence, John E. (2000). *Reading strategies and practices: A compendium* (5th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

K-W-L



K-W-L is a strategy used to encourage students to set their own purposes for reading nonfiction. It also allows a teacher to activate background knowledge and assess its adequacy at the same time. The three steps of K-W-L are simple to apply, though they can be time consuming. In the first step, students share what they already Know about a subject. In the second step, they suggest what they Want to learn. In the third step, they review what they have actually Learned.

- Step 1. Briefly tell the students about the topic they will be studying. Ask them to tell you what they already know about it. This will lead to a brainstorming session in which words, phrases and short sentences will be offered by students. Record them in the “K” column of a K-W-L chart, which you can create on the board or project as a transparency. (See the blank chart masters on the pages at the end of this chapter.)
- Step 2. Ask the students what they would like to learn from the reading selection (usually a textbook chapter or nonfiction trade book). Record these in the “W” column of the chart. These questions become the purpose for reading. You may need to provide subtle prompts in order to nudge students into mentioning important ideas that you know are contained in the material.
- Step 3. After the reading, return to the “W” column and discuss which of the questions have actually been answered in the selection. Those that remain unanswered will need to be researched or simply answered by the teacher.

K-W-L has the advantage of being student centered and naturally engaging. It also underscores the link between new learning and old. On the other hand, it is limited to nonfiction and does not work well with highly unfamiliar material since the students may know little or nothing at the outset.

READ MORE ABOUT IT



- Ogle, Donna. (1986). K-W-L: A teaching model that develops active reading of expository text. *The Reading Teacher*, 39, 564-570.
- Tierney, Robert J., and Readence, John E. (2000). *Reading strategies and practices: A compendium* (5th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon. [Call 800-666-9433]

K-W-L

What do you
Know?

What do you
Want to know?

What have you
Learned?

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K-W-L

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Listen–Read–Discuss



Listen–Read–Discuss is a reading lesson format especially designed for struggling readers. Its three stages represent the before, during, and after stages of all reading lesson formats. Listen–Read–Discuss is markedly different from the Directed Reading Activity or the Directed Reading–Thinking Activity, however, because of its first step. During the Listen phase of the lesson, the teacher completely presents the content, almost as though there was to be no reading at all on the part of the students. Doing so boosts prior knowledge to a very high level, making the reading itself much easier. The following steps constitute the entire approach:

- Step 1. Present the content of the reading selection thoroughly. Use lecture, discussion, demonstration, and whatever other techniques promise to be effective.
- Step 2. Have students read the selection. Provide them with specific purposes, just as you would in a DRA.
- Step 3. Lead a discussion based on the purpose-setting activity you provided.

Listen–Read–Discuss may not sound like the most exciting instructional approach ever devised. It isn't. But its background-building capacity more than makes up for this deficit. Students report learning much more through Listen–Read–Discuss than through alternative approaches, and test results support their claims. Reading is almost like a review since new concepts and ideas have already been thoroughly introduced. Decoding is also facilitated since new terms are pronounced and written on the board during the Listen stage.

READ MORE ABOUT IT



- Manzo, Anthony V., and Casale, Ula P. (1985). Listen–Read–Discuss: A content reading heuristic. *Journal of Reading*, 28, 732–734.
- McKenna, Michael C., and Robinson, Richard D. (2002). *Teaching through text: A content literacy approach to content area reading* (3rd ed.). New York: Longman.