

Helping Students with Comprehension

One common note in Reading Buddy folders is, “My student read the book well, but had difficulty answering the questions on the back of the book.” When students struggle to answer questions about a text it means they likely need more support with reading comprehension. Reading comprehension is a skill that students need to build over time in order to access the meaning in texts they read for school, pleasure, and eventually personal and work tasks. Here are some ideas to help build your students’ comprehension.

Comprehension Check-Ins

Some students may need more opportunities to process what is going on in a book. If we wait until the end they may have forgotten or glossed over earlier sections of the book. To avoid this problem, you can stop more frequently while reading and have a brief discussion about what is happening in the story or what you are learning in a nonfiction text. Good questions to use in these “mini-comp” checks are:

- What just happened? / What is happening?
- What do you think will happen next? Why do you think that?
- What did we just learn about X?
- Why do you think X happened?

During these check-ins you can share your thoughts as well. They should have an informal conversational feel. In addition to giving your students a chance to process information in smaller chunks, it allows students to process the information orally. This is particularly helpful for your students who struggle with attention.

Summarizing Sheets

In the trunk there are laminated sheets that are designed to help your students summarize a text they have just read. Below is an explanation of each side:

Somebody, Wanted, But, So, Then or SWBST is a strategy for fictional texts. To follow the SWBST strategy ask the following questions to your student as you move through the text and record their responses using a white board marker on the laminated sheet.

- **Somebody:** Who was the main character or person?
- **Wanted:** What did the character or person want?
- **But:** What was the problem?

- So: How did the character or person try to solve the problem?
- Then: What was the resolution or outcome? How did the story end?

The student's responses to these questions can then be used very easily to create a one sentence summary of the story which will aid in their comprehension. An example for *The Three Little Pigs* would be... "The three little pigs wanted to build their houses out of straw, wood, and bricks, but the big bad wolf blew down the straw and wood houses so the pigs all hid in the brick house then the wolf couldn't get to them and they lived happily ever after."

Central Idea & Main Idea Non-fiction texts do not have a plot, so we must approach reading them differently than we would a fiction text. Our purpose when we read a non-fiction text is to understand what the author is trying to teach us and the key ideas he or she presents about this topic. As you move through the text ask the following questions and record the responses using a white board marker on the laminated sheet.

- Topic: In a short word or phrase what, is the text about? This can often be answered before starting to read by looking at the title.
- Central Idea: What is the whole text trying to teach you about the topic?
- Main Idea: (for each section) What does the section tell you about the central idea?

The student's responses to these questions can be used to create a short summary about what the author was trying to teach through the text. An example for a story about dolphins might be... "Dolphins are mammals who live, eat, and take care of their young in certain ways (central idea). Dolphins live in the ocean (main idea 1). They eat small fish like herring or cod (main idea 2). Dolphins give birth to their young who stay close to their mom in the first few years of their lives (main idea 3)." Identifying the central idea is a difficult skill that students build up to gradually over time. It may be helpful to work backwards by identifying the main ideas and then use them to think about the central idea.

Modeling Your Thinking

If your student is really struggling to answer a question about a book you have read, try modeling for them how you would answer the question and "think aloud" how you got that answer. Part of what makes comprehension a difficult skill is that the thinking process is invisible; it happens inside our brain. If you can show students how you think about a question by narrating your thought process this can help them to understand that reading requires active thinking.

Example Think-Alouds:

What is the lesson of the Gingerbread Man?

“When I think about the lesson of a book, I think about what the characters did that went wrong. In this book the Gingerbread Man trusted the fox and then the fox ate him. I think about what I already know about trust, that sometimes we trust the wrong people. So, I think combining those two things the lesson is: Be careful who you trust.”

Why did Gerald decide to share his ice cream with Piggie?

“I don’t remember why he decided to share his ice cream so I’m going to look back in the book and see if I can find the page where he decides to share. I see here in the pictures this bubble that shows that he is thinking, and he says he is thinking about Piggie being sad without ice cream. I know that friends don’t like their friends to feel sad, so I think that he decides to share his ice cream because he is a good friend that doesn’t want his friend to be sad.”

