Teachers cannot expect that students at any level know how to create meaning with expository text. Students' ability to comprehend expository text can be improved through the use of comprehension skills. In order to learn the skills, they need to be broken down into specific steps and taught explicitly. Six comprehension skills are described in this paper along with strategies for effective instruction. (Contains 25 references and a figure listing comprehension skills.) (Author/RS)
Teaching Comprehension Skills.

by Andrew P. Johnson
Abstract
Teachers can not expect that students at any level know how to create meaning with expository text. Students' ability to comprehend expository can be improved through the use of comprehension skills. In order to learn they skills, they need to be broken down into specific steps and taught explicitly. Six comprehension skills are described here along with strategies for effective instruction.

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TEACHING COMPREHENSION SKILLS

This article describes strategies that teachers of all levels and subject areas can use to improve their students’ comprehension during the reading of expository texts.

Narrative and Expository Texts

First, a distinction must be made between narrative and expository texts as the purpose for reading each is different. The foremost purpose for reading narrative texts is to enjoy the story. Here, the goal of the teacher is to get students to enter into the story, to relive it in some way, or to create connections to real life emotions or experiences (Rosenblatt, 1983; Zarillo, 1991). Asking students to pull out and recount details from narrative texts results in what Richard Allington calls gentle interrogation (1994). This should be avoided as it does little to produce literate conversations, it keeps students from entering the text world, and it makes reading a less pleasurable experience. Think how you would feel if somebody insisted that you identify the plot, climax and resolution of a novel that you were enjoying, and then asked you to list story details in order to make sure you really were reading the story. Instead, activities and questions for narrative text should be designed to engaged the reader’s emotion imagination and experiences.

Expository texts, however, have the sole purpose of informing the reader. The goal here is to extract information and construct meaning. Comprehension skills should be used with expository text to help students achieve this purpose.

What is Comprehension?

Comprehension is the act of constructing meaning with text (Dole, Duffy, Roehler, & Pearson, 1991; Glover, Ronning, & Bruning, 1990). Meaning does not reside in the text alone waiting for the reader to passively absorb it. Instead, the reader plays an active role, using information in the head to filter, organize, interpret, and generate relationships with incoming information and to ultimately construct meaning (Fielding & Pearson, 1994; Fitzpatrick, 1994; Gunning, 1996; Reutzel & Cooter, 1996). Comprehension then, is an interaction between word identification, knowledge, and comprehension skills (Cunningham, Moore, Cunningham & Moore, 1995).

The Need for Comprehension Skills

Currently, little time is spent in most classrooms teaching students how to comprehend text (Reutzel & Cooter, 1996). Instead, much of reading instruction is spent developing accurate and automatic word identification skills and increasing oral reading fluency. This, however, does not guarantee that students will develop the skills necessary to effectively read expository text. And, while wide reading is important, this also does little to prepare students for careful, thoughtful reading of expository texts (Cunningham & Wall, 1994). Finally, simply exposing students to comprehension work sheets or other tasks requiring them to recall information found in a text also does very little to increase their ability to comprehends texts (Dole et al, 1991; Reutzel & Cooter, 1996). In order to improve students’ ability to comprehend texts independently, explicit instruction is needed in the use of various comprehension skills (Guthrie, Van Meter, McCann, Wigfield, Bennett, Poundstone, Rice, Failbisch, Hunt & Mitchell, 1996).

Even at the college level, it is often assumed that students have the skills needed to successfully comprehend expository text. Yet, there is little evidence to suggest that students at any level will learn these skills if they have not been explicitly taught. And, while there are
many pre-reading activities that teachers can use to help students comprehend what they read, these activities do little to ensure that students will learn the skills necessary to comprehend a piece of expository text independently. An important goal for teachers of reading then is to increase students’ ability to create meaning with text (Gunderson, 1996), and this is best done by explicit instruction (Cunningham & Wall, 1994; Dole et al., 1991; Duffy, 1993; Fielding & Pearson, 1994; Rabren & Darch, 1996).

**What are Comprehension Skills?**

Comprehension skills are the strategies a reader uses to construct meaning and retrieve information from a text. Comprehension skills are very much like thinking skills. A thinking skill is a cognitive process that can be broken down into steps and taught explicitly (Johnson, 1996; Perkins, 1986). Comprehension skills are also cognitive processes which can be broken into steps and taught explicitly. Three types of comprehension skills are recommended here: pre-reading skills, during-reading skills, and post-reading skills (see Figure 1). These skills can be easily learned and flexibly applied to a wide variety reading situations.

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**Pre-Reading Comprehension Skills**

Pre-reading skills are used primarily to activate relevant schemata. Schemata are hypothesized knowledge structures in memory that contain elements of related information (Glover et al., 1990). By activating these, the reader is able to connect new knowledge to knowledge already in memory.

**Preview and overview.** Using this skill, the reader first notes the title and subheadings to get a sense of the structure of the text. Next, the first and final paragraph are read to get a sense of the content. This helps the reader interpret the text as it is then read. Finally, the text is read.

**Web and brainstorm.** Here, the structure of the text is used to create a semantic web. The title or topic of the article is used as a central node. The headings of each section are used as sub nodes. The reader then brainstorms on each sub node to generate relevant knowledge. The web provides a visual organizer that shows the relationship between concepts which are then used to help the reader interpret the text. This same web can also be used as a post-reading skill. Here, the reader uses the information gleaned from the text to add to and refine the web.

**During-Reading Comprehension Skills**

During-reading comprehension skills are used to monitor comprehension, to evaluate ideas gleaned from each paragraph, and to begin to organize ideas within the structure of the text.

**Paragraph re-read.** This skill is used by many expert readers intuitively. First a paragraph is quickly read to get a general sense of its content. Next, the paragraph is read a second time. Finally, the reader analyzes the structure and content of each paragraph and evaluates the information in order to find an important sentence or idea. This also helps the reader to make connections with the other ideas found in the text.

**Read and pause.** This skill is designed primarily to monitor comprehension and develop metacognitive awareness. Here, the reader pauses after each paragraph to see if there is
sufficient understanding, then either returns to re-reads the paragraph or continues reading the
next paragraph. Some readers find it helpful to use a 3x5 inch index card to help focus and
concentrate when reading. The card is moved to the bottom of each paragraph as it is being read.

**Post-Reading Comprehension Skills**

Post-reading skills are used to reconstruction important ideas, organize those ideas, and
evaluate those ideas within the structure of the text.

**Article re-read.** First, the text is read quickly to provide the reader with a sense of topic.
This knowledge is then used to interpret, sort, and evaluate the information as the text is read a
second time. Finally, interesting or important ideas are recorded.

**Sequencing.** First, interesting or important ideas are recorded as the text is being read.
Then, those ideas are evaluated and arranged in order of their importance. Finally, the readers
adds their own ideas and interpretations to the list.

**Teaching Comprehension Skills**

A review of research indicates that students appear to benefit whenever cognitive
processes are made clear and explicit (Adams, 1989; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1992; Chance,
1986; Collins, Brown, & Neuman, 1989; Johnson, 1996; Marzano, 1991). It makes sense then,
that explicit instruction be used in the teaching of comprehension skills. Effective skills
instruction of any kind incorporates five components: (a) direct instruction and modeling, (b)
identification of the procedural components, (c) guided practice, (d) regular practice, and (e)
application or use in other areas to ensure transfer (Collins et al, 1989; Fielding & Pearson, 1994;
Hobbs & Schlichter, 1990; Perkins, 1986; Pressley, Harris, & Marks, 1992). Each of these
components are described here as they relate to comprehension skills. Also included is an
example of an 8th grade science teacher, Mr. Naegel, teaching a comprehension skill to his
students.

**Direct Instruction and Modeling**

First, the teacher selects a comprehension skill to teach, introduces it, then explains how
it should be used. The teacher then reads a short piece of text out loud using cognitive modeling
to demonstrate exactly how the comprehension skill is applied. This component is used to
provide students with an overview and should be relatively brief.

**Identification of the Procedural Components**

This component is often intertwined with direct instruction and modeling. Here, the
teacher identifies the specific steps used with the comprehension skill. It is helpful to use a
thinking frame to teach these steps. A thinking frame is a concrete representation of a particular
cognitive skill, broken down into specific steps and used to support the thought process as
students begin to learn any skill (Johnson, 1996; Perkins, 1987). Thinking frames can be
constructed in poster form and placed in the classroom for effective teaching and easy review.

**Guided Practice**

Guided practice, sometimes referred to as scaffolded instruction is provided when the
teacher takes the whole class through each step of the skill (Johnson & Graves, 1997). The goal
during this component is to provide the support necessary to allow students to learn to use the
skill independently. Here, the teacher (a) teaches a comprehension skill initially; (b) takes the
whole class through each step of the skill several times; and (c) designs an activity so that
students can practice the skill independently.
**Regular Practice**

Like any skill, students need regular practice in order to be able to use comprehension skills effectively. Fielding and Pearson (1994) suggest that students practice comprehension skills every day. Any time students are asked to read expository text, they should be reminded to use a comprehension skill. This is where thinking frames are useful as the teacher can quickly point to the steps and encourage students to use a comprehension skill with which they are comfortable. **Integration into the Curriculum**

Comprehension skills should be used throughout the curriculum at all levels whenever students are asked to read expository text. Even high school and college instructors should remind students of the steps necessary to successfully comprehend a piece of expository text. Using comprehension skills this way provides students with additional comprehension practice as well as helping them to more effectively construct meaning with assigned texts. **Final Word**

Teaching comprehension skills in this manner will help students at all levels become more effective readers of expository text. It is not necessary or effective to teach all six comprehension skills listed here. Instead, select a few skills to teach each year. Provide experiences and allow students to experiment in order to find the comprehension skills that work best for them. Instruction in comprehension skills should begin in the primary grades and continue on through high school and beyond. Teaching comprehension skills at all levels and in all subject areas is one way to ensure that students will be ready to comprehend expository text found on college campuses and in the work place.
References


FIGURE 1: Comprehension Skills

Pre-Reading Comprehension skills

Preview/Overview
1. Look at the title and headings.
2. Read the first paragraph and last paragraph.
3. Read the article/chapter.

Web and Brainstorm
1. Look at the title and headings.
2. Create a web using the title/topics as a central node.
3. Using section headings as sub nodes.
4. Brainstorm on each sub node.
5. Read the article/chapter.
6. Add to and modify the original web.

During-Reading Comprehension skills

Paragraph Re-Read
1. Read each paragraph quickly.
2. Re-read to find important sentence or ideas.
3. Continue.

Read and Pause
1. Read a paragraph.
2. Pause and check. (Do I understand?)
3. Return or resume.

Post-Reading Comprehension skills

Article Re-Read
1. Read the article/chapter.
2. Re-read the article/chapter.
3. Note or record important ideas.

Sequencing
1. As you read, list important ideas.
2. After reading, arrange ideas in order of their importance.
3. Look for your own ideas to add.
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