



Guidance

Curriculum and  
Standards

# Primary *National Strategy*

## Understanding Reading Comprehension: 1

**What is reading comprehension?**

**Primary  
headteachers,  
literacy  
coordinators, Key  
Stage 1 and 2  
teachers**

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## Reading comprehension

As children learn to read they are able to decode the text by orchestrating a range of cues. To become fluent readers they must also understand or comprehend what they read. To help them do this they need to be taught a range of reading comprehension strategies and be encouraged to reflect on their own understanding and learning. Such an approach helps children go beyond literal interpretation and recall to explore the complex meanings of a text using inference and deduction. They can begin to learn these strategies from the earliest stages of learning to read.

This leaflet will help you to understand how readers make sense of what they read, review the research evidence and suggest ways to teach reading comprehension strategies. There are two further leaflets with ideas for practical activities to use in the classroom.

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## What is reading comprehension?

Comprehension is an active process that involves all these strategies and behaviours:

### **Comprehension – making meaning from texts**

*understanding  
the text*

*engaging with  
the text*



*making  
connections with  
existing  
knowledge*

*critically  
evaluating the  
text*

*reflecting upon  
responses*

*monitoring own understanding  
making decisions about which strategies will help  
clarify understanding*

## What can we learn from research on reading comprehension?

### Research

Over the last decades there has been much research into reading comprehension.

**Past research** (1945–80) was characterised by attempts to:

- identify the sub-skills of comprehension;
- establish a hierarchy of skills;
- teach these skills in a progressive order.

Teachers may be familiar with comprehension exercises based on this approach from their own experience at school.

**Recent research** is based on seeing the child as:

- actively engaging with the text to create meaning;
- acquiring strategies whilst engaged in authentic reading rather than as a separate set of skills;
- applying cognitive, interpretive and problem-solving strategies;
- influenced by differences in their own experience and in their wider socio-cultural context.

There is growing consensus about the kinds of experiences children need to develop their reading comprehension, the teaching model to support this and the range of strategies that might be helpful.



## Evidence from research overviews

The major research-derived strategies for improving reading:

- encourage extensive reading;
- teach decoding, with an emphasis on morphology;
- provide explicit work on sight vocabulary;
- teach the use of context cues and monitoring meaning;
- teach vocabulary;
- encourage readers to ask their own 'Why?' questions of a text;
- teach self-regulated comprehension strategies, for example:
  - prior knowledge activation;
  - question generation;
  - construction of mental images during reading;
  - summarisation;
  - analysing text into story grammar and non-fiction genre components;
- encourage reciprocal teaching (teacher modelling of strategies + scaffolding for student independence);
- encourage transactional strategies (an approach based on readers exploring texts with their peers and their teacher).



*(From Pressley, 2000)*

A further examination of 230 research studies on reading identified three important factors in the effective teaching of reading comprehension:

- **Learning about words:** vocabulary development and vocabulary instruction play an important role in understanding what has been read.
- **Interacting with the text:** comprehension is an active process that requires 'an intentional and thoughtful interaction between the reader and the text'.
- **Explicitly teaching strategies for reading comprehension:** children make better progress in their reading when teachers provide direct instruction and design and implement activities that support understanding.

*(From National Reading Panel Report, 2000)*

### References

National Reading Panel, (2000) *Report Of The National Reading Panel*, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office. Available at [www.nationalreadingpanel.org](http://www.nationalreadingpanel.org)

Pressley, M. (2000) 'What Should Comprehension Instruction Be The Instruction Of?' In Kamil, M. *et al.* (eds), *Handbook of Reading Research*, Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

## Research findings

### Extensive reading

Research indicates that the most recent developments in improving comprehension have taken place in classrooms that promote extensive reading. This creates an environment where high quality talk about texts can be encouraged.

### The critical role of the teacher

The model of teaching advocated by research is a balance of direct instruction along with teacher modelling and guided practice leading to independent practice and autonomy.

The role of the teacher is crucial in explicitly encouraging the use of comprehension strategies. Comprehension improves when teachers provide explicit instruction in comprehension strategies and when they design and implement activities that support understanding.



### Vocabulary development

Research stresses the importance of work to develop children's phonic skills, their vocabulary and teaching them about words. Children who can decode quickly and accurately and have a sight vocabulary of known words, can autonomise some of the reading process, freeing up more mental capacity to think about the meaning of what they read.

*(See Leaflet 3, p. 2 'Semantic strategies' for practical ideas.)*

### Metacognitive awareness

Metacognitive awareness involves 'self-awareness' and an ability to reflect on one's understanding and learning. Research highlights the importance of metacognition in learning to read:

- Younger and poorer readers often do not recognise when they have not understood a text and they are therefore unable to make an autonomous decision to use a strategy to enhance their understanding.
- More experienced readers show a greater awareness of their own level of understanding. They stop when a text does not make sense to them and some will go on to select a strategy that might help them to overcome their problem.

Teachers can model for children how fluent readers monitor their understanding and use strategies to clarify their own understanding.

*(See Leaflet 3, p. 6 'Helping children to monitor their own understanding' for practical ideas.)*



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## When do we teach reading comprehension?

We want to encourage children to become enthusiastic, autonomous and thoughtful readers who not only decode the text but understand and engage with what they are reading. Teaching is central to this.

The structure of the literacy hour provides the context for direct teaching and application of reading comprehension strategies across the primary age range. The strategies can be applied to picture books as well as more complex texts. The wider reading environment in the classroom and school provides further opportunities for extensive reading.

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<b>The teaching sequence</b>	<b>Within the literacy hour</b>	<b>The wider reading environment</b>
<b>Teacher modelling</b>	<p><b>Shared reading</b></p> <p>Demonstrate how to use a range of comprehension strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● model active engagement with the text, for example rehearsing prior knowledge, generating mental images, making connections with other texts;</li> <li>● plan opportunities for children to interact and collaborate, for example ask ‘why’ questions, make comparisons between texts;</li> <li>● demonstrate how fluent readers monitor and clarify their understanding, for example encourage reciprocal teaching (<i>See Leaflet 3, p. 7 for further information</i>);</li> <li>● plan opportunities to interpret and respond to the text, for example teach strategies for using inference and deduction. (and <b>Word level work</b>)</li> </ul> <p>Plan direct instruction so that children can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● develop a wider vocabulary;</li> <li>● understand why words are spelt in a particular way;</li> <li>● learn to read and spell an increasing number of words by sight.</li> </ul>	<p>Encourage extensive reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● ensure regular opportunities for independent, extended reading;</li> <li>● provide access to a wide range of quality reading materials;</li> <li>● provide opportunities and resources to read for a range of purposes across the curriculum;</li> <li>● plan a read aloud programme for all ages;</li> <li>● provide story props, puppets and artefacts for retelling stories;</li> </ul>
<b>Guided practice</b>	<p><b>Guided reading</b></p> <p>Support children as they:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● apply word level learning to decode words;</li> <li>● actively engage with the text;</li> <li>● monitor their own understanding and prompt them to utilise different strategies when solving reading problems.</li> </ul> <p>Scaffold opportunities for children to use different reading comprehension strategies, for example using the strategy modelled in the shared reading session and applying it to a new text.</p> <p>Encourage children to explain how they solved a word problem.</p> <p>Encourage personal response and reflection.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● plan opportunities for children to use the class collections and the school library;</li> <li>● promote reading at home;</li> <li>● organise a regular author focus in each class;</li> <li>● organise special events, for example book weeks, author visits, storytellers, book sales, book awards, etc.</li> </ul>
<b>Independent practice and autonomy</b>	<p><b>Independent reading</b></p> <p>Expect children to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● use word level learning independently;</li> <li>● monitor their own understanding and choose an appropriate strategy when necessary;</li> <li>● engage with and respond to texts, for example in a reading journal.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● celebrate personal reading achievements, e.g. book awards, reading heroes and advocates, displays, etc.</li> </ul>

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