



**Primary**  
*National Strategy*

Guidance

Curriculum and  
Standards

Understanding  
Reading  
Comprehension:2

**Strategies to develop reading  
comprehension**

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

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## Strategies to develop reading comprehension

Reading comprehension is an essential part of the reading process. Children need to be taught a range of reading comprehension strategies to help them fully understand texts.

This is the second of a set of three leaflets about reading comprehension. Leaflet 1 introduces evidence from research and gives a sequence for teaching. Leaflets 2 and 3 give practical suggestions for teachers to use in their own classrooms. This leaflet has information on a range of cognitive strategies.

This information will help teachers to:

- become aware of a wide range of strategies to encourage reading comprehension;
- know when and how to use them in shared and guided reading;
- know how to model the strategies to children;
- know how to encourage children to use the strategies themselves in shared, guided and independent reading.



### Activating prior knowledge

Activation of prior knowledge can develop children's understanding by helping them to see links between what they already know and new information they are encountering. Here are some ideas for collaborative activities. They will encourage children to bring to the forefront of their minds knowledge that relates to the text they are about to read or are reading.

- Start with the title, chapter heading or picture on the front cover. Ask children what it makes them think of. Collect ideas orally, using drawings or by making brief notes.
- Select a key word from the title or an artefact. Ask children to think of memories associated with it. Give sentence starters such as *This reminds me of ...*, *It makes me think of ...*
- Record ideas using a concept mapping or mind-mapping to show the links between ideas.

### Prediction

Stopping to predict what a text or part of a text might be about makes readers pay more attention when they begin to read. They need to consider the reasons for their predictions, look for evidence in the text and revise their initial predictions if necessary.

- Demonstrate how to read the text a section at a time, explain what is happening and predict what will happen next and how it will end. Read on and point out the explicit and implicit evidence that supports or confounds your predictions. Demonstrate how to revise your initial ideas and suggest a hypothesis based on the new evidence.

- Involve children in this process as part of shared reading. Model how to make written notes of your predictions and display these, for instance as you read a class novel aloud. Encourage children to add their own notes based on what they have heard.
- Support children as they make written predictions and revisions relating to guided or independent reading, using their reading journals.

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## Constructing images

Creating visual images using visualisation, drawing or drama helps children to make links between their prior knowledge and new ideas. These activities will encourage children to go back to the text to check or look for more details, thus deepening their understanding.

### Visualisation

Model the process in shared reading:

- read aloud from a fiction or non-fiction text;
- talk about the ideas that you had while you were reading;
- ask children to think of the picture that they have in their heads.

Then read another passage; children work in pairs describing their image to one another.

### Drawing

Ask children to draw a character based on information gathered from the text. You could do this early in the story and then return to it after reading. Ask children to tell you if they have learned anything new about this character.

- Draw a map of a quest or journey based on details from the story.
- Draw a diagram to represent an instruction or explanation text.
- Make a model based on the description of a particular place in a story.

### Drama

Select the key sentences from a text or chapter. Children work in groups to create a still photograph (drama freeze frame) of the moment. Take a photograph using a digital camera and put it on the computer. Children can then add thought bubbles giving each character's thoughts at that moment in the story.



## Questioning

Skilled questioning will develop children's understanding of texts but the questions need to be carefully thought through and planned. Closed, factual questions test children's ability to recall knowledge but do not encourage them to use inference and deduction or to engage closely with what they have read.

These practical ideas will help you to plan questions that will deepen children's understanding of the text.

### Generic questions and questions relating to particular texts

Some questions may be asked of any text while others relate to particular texts or text types. Children need to become familiar with this type of questioning as a regular part of shared and guided reading sessions and to move towards asking these questions themselves as they read independently.

### Examples of questions

Generic questions		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>What do you think and feel about what you have read?</i></li> <li>● <i>Who is this writing intended for?</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>What is the purpose of this writing?</i></li> <li>● <i>Who wrote this and when?</i></li> <li>● <i>What is the form of this writing?</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Have you read any other texts like this one?</i></li> <li>● <i>Did anything puzzle you?</i></li> </ul>
Fiction and plays	Poetry	Non-fiction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Who is the narrator?</i></li> <li>● <i>Who is the most important character?</i></li> <li>● <i>What do we know about the setting?</i></li> <li>● <i>Why does the writer use dialogue?</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>What do you see in your mind when you read this?</i></li> <li>● <i>What is the effect of the rhyme, rhythm and line length?</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>How can we locate information quickly in this text?</i></li> <li>● <i>Why does the author use diagrams?</i></li> </ul>

### Children generating their own questions

Active reading should generate questions in the reader's mind. It is important to model explicitly this kind of questioning to young and inexperienced readers, thus making visible to them what is usually an internal monologue for expert readers.

**Generating questions:** Select a text and make a note of any questions that come into your mind as you read. Focus on questions you are asking of yourself rather than questions you would ask children. Reread the text and try to think of at least two different answers for each of the questions.

Where does it happen?

Demonstrate this process during shared reading and note question starters, for example *Why is this ...? If this is true, then why ...? What if ...? Is there a reason for ...?*

Is the problem ...?

**Hot-seating:** Take on the role of a character from the text. Invite children to create questions for the character and give answers in role. Encourage children to move beyond factual questions to probe more deeply into motives or consequences.

Involve individuals in working in role themselves and answering questions made up by other children.

Who are the characters ...?

**Talk to the author:** Read a text in shared reading and then demonstrate how to note any questions that you would like to ask the author, for example *Who was this? Why did this happen?* Children can then try this for themselves. Discuss what you have found out about the difference between fact and opinion and any signs of bias.

**Focus journals:** Children read part of a text independently before their guided reading session. Write a focus question on the board, for example *What seemed important to you in what you learned about x?* The children read the focus, reflect on their response and write in their journals. This then serves as a basis for discussion.

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

### Questioning at different levels

Questions can operate at different levels, taking children deeper into texts and requiring different levels of thinking. An effective strategy is to ask questions that make increasing cognitive demands on children moving from simple recall, through inference to questions that ask for evaluation and response, following Bloom's Taxonomy.

### Higher- and lower-order levels of thinking

**Bloom's Taxonomy**, starting from the simplest behaviour to the most complex:

**1 Knowledge** – for example *Who? What? Where? When? How?*

**2 Comprehension** – for example *What do we mean by ...? Explain ...*

**3 Application** – for example *What other examples are there?*

**4 Analysis** – for example *What is the evidence for ...?*

**5 Synthesis** – for example *How could we add to, improve, design, solve ...?*

**6 Evaluation** – for example *What do you think about ...? What are your criteria for assessing ...?*

Questions to develop children's understanding of the text should promote thinking at three levels:

1. **Literal questions** ask children to recall information that is directly stated in the text.
2. **Deductive or inferential questions** ask children to work out answers by reading between the lines, by combining information found in different parts of the text and by going beyond the information given by drawing on their 'world view'.
3. **Evaluative or response questions** ask children to go beyond the text by, for example, thinking whether the text achieves its purpose, or making connections with other texts.

At any stage of reading development children should be expected to be able to think about the text at all three levels.

### Alternatives to questions

Asking too many questions can discourage children from giving elaborate or thoughtful answers. Alternative strategies can provide more thinking time, allow more children to respond and open up deeper discussion, for example:

**Discussion starter:** Select a key sentence from a text, such as a cliffhanger at the end of a chapter or one character's opinion of another. Read it out and use it as the starting point for a discussion, encouraging alternative responses: *Who has a different point of view?*

#### Further information

Read pp. 61–73 in the unit *Conditions for learning in Excellence and Enjoyment: learning and teaching in the primary years* for more information about questioning.

See also leaflet *Talking in Class* available as part of the pack *Teaching and learning literacy and mathematics in Year 3* (DfES 2003).

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## Text structure analysis

Research suggests that readers use their growing knowledge of stories to help them predict and understand what is happening and is likely to happen in new stories. This can also be applied to the structure of non-fiction texts.

### Story maps, story shapes and story charts

- After reading, demonstrate how to draw a 'map' of events in a story. Involve children in recalling and retelling the story. Ask children to work collaboratively to map other stories and make comparisons between them.
- Use story mapping to make the structure of particular stories explicit, for example a circular story or a journey from 'A to B'.

**Structural organisers:** Demonstrate how to map the content of a non-fiction text onto a structural organiser grid, for example point and evidence grid; cause and effect grid; argument versus counter-argument list.

(See 'Non-fiction fliers' – download or order from: [www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/literacy/publications/text/63353/](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/literacy/publications/text/63353/))

## Sequencing texts

Children can learn to apply their knowledge about texts and reading when carrying out sequencing activities. The text is jumbled up and then readers are asked to reorder lines of a poem, or paragraphs of a fiction or non-fiction text.

**Poems:** Demonstrate how to look for clues for the correct order of a jumbled poem, for example matching rhyming words at the ends of lines; assembling lines into verses of the same length; thinking about the meaning and checking that it makes sense; identifying lines that suggest a beginning and a conclusion.

Give groups of children a similar activity and compare the sequences. Talk about the effect of any differences in order.

**Recount or instructional text:** Jumble paragraphs from a chronologically sequenced text. Demonstrate how to look for a logical order of events and make use of connectives such as first, later, next, finally.

**Comparing texts:** Look at a range of examples and discuss texts that have several possible orders. Involve children in suggesting which texts have only one possible sequence and why.

## Summarising

Children need to learn how to identify the main idea in a text. Effective summarising involves children in evaluating a text and deciding which elements of it are most significant.

**Teacher modelling:** Demonstrate how to skim read a text and then give an oral summary. Support children as they skim read and summarise short passages.

Go through a text paragraph by paragraph, highlighting the key sentence(s) in each. Demonstrate how to restructure key information into a non-prose form, for example producing a labelled picture using the information in the text.

**Guided practice:** Stop at regular points in shared and guided reading and ask children to summarise the section you have just read. Challenge them to summarise within a given word limit.

Ask children to write a brief summary at the end of each chapter outlining key events and further insights into character and plot.

## DARTs (Directed Activities Related to Text)

A group of activities for developing reading comprehension were developed in the 1980s by Lunzer and Gardner. They are known collectively as DARTs and include:

- **Prediction** (see p. 2).
- **Text analysis and text marking activities:** underlining, highlighting or numbering parts of the text.
- **Cloze activities:** words or phrases are deleted from the text and readers work out what the missing words could be through the use of contextual and syntactic cues.
- **Sequencing activities** (see above).

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