

Fostering Deep Comprehension in the Classroom

In the last module, you learned about the importance of text complexity in creating truly literate students who are ready to live and work in the 21st century. Critical to reading complex texts, of course, is student understanding of these texts. Students “must show a steadily growing ability to discern more from and make fuller use of text, including making an increasing number of connections among ideas and between texts, considering a wider range of textual evidence, and becoming more sensitive to inconsistencies, ambiguities, and poor reasoning in texts” (*Common Core State Standards Initiative* (CCSSI), 2010, p. 8). In this article, we will use the term *comprehension* to mean this wider understanding.

Common Core State Standards: Reading

Historically, English language arts classes have focused primarily on literary texts—stories, poems, and dramas. The CCSS places a far greater emphasis on student engagement with informational texts. As you consider the reading standards, focus especially on how these standards will apply to informational texts, which you will need to be using more often in your classroom.

In the CCSS, the college and career readiness anchor standards for reading are broken down into four basic elements:

- The ability to determine **key ideas and details**:
 - what is clearly stated versus what is inferred
 - textual evidence that supports conclusions
 - analysis of people, events, and ideas
- An understanding of **craft and structure**:
 - word choice and tone—connotative, literal, and figurative

- analysis of structure
- point of view and style
- The **integration of knowledge and ideas** in various content formats:
 - evaluate content from diverse media
 - evaluation of arguments and reasoning
 - comparison of texts
- A **wide range of reading and text complexity**, including literary and informational texts

A Sampling of Standards: Informational Text and Literature

The Common Core State Standards break each of the basic four elements of reading down into clear and progressive grade level standards. For example, both literature and informational reading have “integration of knowledge and ideas” standards in which students evaluate and analyze content from multiple sources.

Here’s an example of the same “integration of knowledge and ideas” standard for *informational texts* written for four different grade levels. Notice how the standard—which is focused on identifying and evaluating information—develops through the grades. In kindergarten, students are actually looking at illustrations to evaluate how they support the text. By Grades 11 and 12, students are evaluating information presented in different media.

Kindergarten	Grade 4	Grade 7	Grades 11–12
With prompting and support, describe the relationship between illustrations and the text in which they appear.	Interpret information presented visually, orally, or quantitatively and explain how the information contributes to an understanding of the text.	Compare and contrast a text to an audio, video, or multimedia version of the text, analyzing each medium’s portrayal of the subject.	Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats.

To see how the informational standards compare to the literature standards, take a look at an “integration of knowledge and ideas” standard for literature that also focuses on identifying and evaluating content:

Kindergarten	Grade 4	Grade 7	Grades 11–12
With prompting and support, describe the relationship between illustrations and the story in which they appear.	Make connections between the text of a story or drama and a visual or oral presentation of the text, identifying where each version reflects specific descriptions and directions in the text.	Compare and contrast a written story, drama, or poem to its audio, filmed, staged, or multimedia version, analyzing the effects of techniques unique to each medium.	Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem, evaluating how each version interprets the source text.

By looking at the reading standards for both informational text and literature, you can see that they are similar in focus but different in what students are required to analyze, based on the type of text they are reading.

A Comprehension Focus

Before teachers can get down to the nitty-gritty of using comprehension strategies in the classroom, they need to think about the overall milieu of their class. Is your instructional style conducive to successful comprehension for all students? In their article “Reading Comprehension: What Works” (1994), authors Linda G. Fielding and P. David Pearson suggest four components to any successful comprehension instruction:

- **Ample amounts of reading time**—Students need to practice reading and they need to be engaged in what they are reading. As they read, they gain knowledge.

- **Comprehension strategies**—Teachers cannot assume that students will understand what they read. Instead, teachers should provide (and model for) students specific strategies that will help them before, during, and after they read. (See below for specific strategies.)
- **Peer and collaborative learning**—Students rarely learn best in isolation. In more cooperative learning activities, students build community and learn about a text through other people’s thinking processes.
- **Discussion with teachers and peers**—Comprehension is aided in group discussions particularly when the teacher does not control the discussion or force an interpretation of a text (p. 65).

Pre-Reading, During-Reading, and Post-Reading Stages

Think about the reading process as having three stages—pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading. Each of these stages provides opportunities for students to read deeply a range of increasingly complex text, as called for in the CCSS. The following table defines three stages of reading:

Stage 1: Pre-Reading	Stage 2: During-Reading	Stage 3: Post-Reading
Students assess what prior knowledge they have of the content being taught and establish their purpose for reading.	Students determine their level of comprehension by visualizing, clarifying areas that are still confusing, and beginning to make connections with the text.	Students deepen their understanding of the content, build further connections, and expand their knowledge of the subject matter.

Several simple strategies that assist students in comprehending subject matter can be easily implemented into any lesson plan. These strategies not only help students connect with the ideas being presented to them in the text, but also support them in reading complex text closely with attention to detail. The reading skills they learn through these strategies will be invaluable not only in the K-12 school career, but will prepare them for the kinds of reading required for college and career.

When students employ one or more comprehension strategies while reading a text, they actually understand and retain more of the content. Moreover, teachers find that they do not have to engage in the frustrating task of reteaching material because the necessary background knowledge has already been established in students' memories.

The following table provides suggested general comprehension strategies for each stage of the reading process whether reading literature or informational texts.

Stage 1: Pre-Reading	Stage 2: During-Reading	Stage 3: Post-Reading
<p>Strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Predicting • Skimming • Reading the title and section headings • Identifying what prior knowledge one has on the topic • Learning important vocabulary words 	<p>Strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rereading • Making predictions • Asking questions • Answering questions • Constructing mental pictures • Identifying unknown vocabulary • Summarizing along the way 	<p>Strategies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rereading • Evaluating whether the purpose for reading was met • Confirming predictions • Summarizing • Reflecting • Questioning • Thinking about how the material connects to one's own life

Strategies for Reading in English Language Arts

Let's take a look at a few specific comprehension strategies that require students to read actively. Remember to consider the type of text students are reading and the objective set for reading that text before choosing the strategy students will use.

K-W-L (What I Know; Want To Learn; Learned)

This strategy is particularly good for use with informational text. This strategy takes readers through all the stages of reading. Before reading a text, students complete the first two columns of a K-W-L chart. In the K column, students are identifying any prior knowledge they have on the subject. In order to determine this, they will likely have to preview the text, reading the title, section headings, and any captions or diagrams. As part of completing the W column, students are questioning and

predicting, among other things, what they might learn while reading the text. As they complete the L column, after students complete the reading, they are using strategies such as summarizing, confirming predictions, and reflecting.

For example, if the topic is “whales,” students list what they already know about whales in the K column. In the W column, they record what they would like to find out. Students can and should get very specific. Now students read the material—with their own goals in mind. As they read, additional questions may arise and can be added to the W column of the chart. After they read, they fill in the final column labeled L, answering as many of the W questions as they can. Other versions of the K-W-L chart add another W column for *what* else they would like to learn and an H column for *how* they will locate that information.

<p style="text-align: center;">K What I know</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">W What I want to learn</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">L What I learned</p>
Whales are large mammals.	How big are the largest whales?	The blue whale is the largest animal known to man.

Venn Diagram: Comparing and Contrasting

In the domain of integration of knowledge and ideas, the CCSS has a standard that requires students to compare and contrast various literary elements, depending on the grade level. For example, students compare two characters from a story using a Venn diagram. Or they might be asked to compare two separate texts. Students receive the Venn diagram before they begin reading. They fill it in during or after they read, identifying elements that are unique to and similar to both items being compared. The diagram serves as a tool from which students can explain their thinking about the characters in a story or the attributes of two texts. They can use the diagram to help them summarize their findings or to make connections to other content or experiences.

Questioning the Author

This strategy is particularly useful for the craft and structure standards in the CCSS. For example, a 6th grade standard for reading literature asks students to explain how an author develops the point of view of the narrator or speaker in a text. This post-reading strategy invites students to analyze the text by asking questions about the author. For example:

- Why did the author write this?
- What is the author's main message?
- Did the author convey the idea clearly?
- Why does the author use a certain word or phrase?

These questions lend themselves to small- or large-group discussions in which students are continue to shape their knowledge as they listen to others.

SQ3R (Survey-Question-Read-Recite-Review)

SQ3R is a strategy that spans all the stages of the reading process. This reading strategy could be particularly effective when students read informational text. Several of the CCSS standards for reading call for students to cite key ideas and details and to integrate knowledge and ideas from multiple sources. After assigning a text passage, students do the following (with you modeling the step for them if they are not familiar with the strategy):

- **Survey**—Survey what you are about to read by considering the title, headings, illustrations, the first paragraph, and the last paragraph.
- **Question**—Develop a question that reflects the purpose of reading. Record other questions that arise during the survey step. A good place to start is to have students turn the subheadings into questions. Students may also pose questions regarding illustrations, diagrams, graphs, and so on. Write down unfamiliar vocabulary and find meanings.

- **Read**—As you read, look for the answers to your questions. Record new questions that arise in response. Use context clues to help understand new vocabulary words.
- **Recite**—Without looking at the text, recall what it was about. Articulate answers to questions. Reread if necessary to answer questions.
- **Review**—Answer questions about the purpose for reading the text. Review written answers. Summarize the main information in the text through various means such as flow charts, graphic organizers, written summaries, or group discussion.

There are a plethora of comprehension strategies from which to choose. The primary intention of the CCSS reading standards is to teach students to actively read a wide range of texts. Students should attend to the text as directed by the teacher, who asks text-based questions and requires students to identify evidence from the text to support their answers. As students learn to read closely and purposefully, they will become able to handle and comprehend increasingly more complex texts.