

# The Most Effective Literacy Teachers . . .

- Build Literacy instruction around key ideas in learning theory:
  - People learn (retain and reapply in new contexts) most effectively when they:
    - focus on a few key concepts;
    - of great import
    - that are taught in great depth;
    - over a long period of time;
    - and applied in a variety of texts and contexts
- Raise expectations for children's learning by exploring where comprehension strategies *lead* with their students and colleagues - recognize and explore the dimensions and outcomes of understanding with their students,
- Focus deep structure (comprehension) instruction on strategies known to be used by proficient readers, thinking aloud to reveal their own thinking, then gradually release responsibility to students to use the strategies independently;
- Focus surface structure instruction on the skills known to be essential for children's fluency word learning;
- Use a wide variety of texts including leveled texts to develop fluency (word learning) and texts rich in ideas to develop comprehension;
- Teach text elements and text structures to help children navigate different genres;
- Create a Literacy Studio (workshop setting) that allows daily time to for teachers to confer with individuals and meet with invitational groups (small, needs-based);
- Create a classroom environment conducive to scholarly oral interactions, intimate conversation focused on deeper comprehension and growing independence for students;
- Are themselves readers and avid learners, constantly scrutinizing their own reading and understanding processes in order to provide the most precise and responsive instruction;
- Provide lengthy periods of time for students to read and write independently every day.

# What are the comprehension strategies?

## Comprehension Strategies

### Monitoring for Meaning

Knowing when, as a reader, you fully understand

Knowing when, as a reader, you don't understand

Knowing what you need to understand

Knowing a wide range of fix-up strategies to repair comprehension

### Use Schema

Relate the new to the known - activate prior knowledge to help understand new information

Make connections between texts, portions of the same text, the text and broader knowledge and the text and the reader

Create schema using in a variety of ways if, as a reader, you realize that you lack necessary schema to understand a text or concept

### Infer

#### Predict

Make independent decisions about inexplicit meanings

Create meaning to fill in gaps in the text

Form opinions and defend them

Draw conclusions and defend them

### Ask Questions

Generate questions before, during and after reading

Use questions to focus on one aspect of the text, delve more deeply into its meaning and extrapolate to insights within and beyond the text

#### Create Images

Use images that emanate from all five senses to understand more vividly, more deeply

Use images that emanate from the emotions to understand more vividly, more deeply

### Determine Importance

Make decisions about which ideas and/or concepts are most important in a text

Articulate why those ideas are most important and what influenced you, as a reader, to focus on them

Identify key themes and series of events in text

Extrapolate to less explicit meaning or larger ideas within and beyond the text

### Synthesize

Be aware of the evolution of thought during reading - how your thinking changes as you read

Create a cogent expression of key points after reading - this expression may contain information from a variety of sources outside the current text

## Teachers model and think aloud to show:

- How proficient readers use one or more strategies while reading text, particularly challenging text;
- How proficient readers use comprehension strategies as thinking strategies across the curriculum;
- How readers interact, using the strategy language, with others and/or use writing to better understand the ideas in a given text;
- How readers and writers set and/or use a particular purpose for reading and writing;
- How readers enhance comprehension because of and in conjunction with the interpretations of others;
- readers assume a stance or bias with respect to the author, the text, other readers;
- readers create models (oral, written, artistic and dramatic) to show thinking about text.

## Why Teach Strategies?

Comprehension strategy instruction:

1. Causes us to become more reflective about our own reading.
2. Creates a common language between teachers and kids.
3. Increases the amount of time spent teaching comprehension.
4. Generates innovation in classrooms.
5. Helps teachers raise expectations for all children.
6. Makes it acceptable to read slowly with depth and focus.
7. Focuses our instruction on the reader, not just the text.
8. Helps children build a vast bank of content area knowledge because they use strategies.

# How do we best teach comprehension strategies?

## *Key ideas*

- Select a strategy - questions about hierarchy and order
- Study the key points related to the comprehension strategy -what will you teach during the strategy study?
- Read adult text; scrutinize your own use of the strategy
- Consult the gradual release of responsibility continuum for early phase preparation
- Select texts from which to think aloud - become very familiar with the text
- Begin thinking aloud, gradually inviting the children to participate through turn and talk and trio share
- Encourage the children to immediately apply the strategy in independent reading
- Confer to assess progress in using the strategy and to set new goals - use the book the child is reading or the book used in the think aloud
- Continue thinking aloud; use more difficult texts and new genres
- Plan on 4 - 6 weeks per strategy study

## The Outcomes of Understanding - Cognitive Markers of Deep Understanding

### The Outcomes of Understanding in Narrative Text

<p><b>Thinking patterns that characterize deeper comprehension (narrative text)</b></p>
<p>1. Readers <b>experience empathy</b> - we sense that we are somehow <i>in the book</i>. Empathy can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Character empathy</b> in which we feel we know the characters, experience the same emotions, stand by them in their trials</li> <li>• <b>Setting empathy</b> in which we feel a part of the setting,</li> <li>• <b>Conflict empathy</b> in which we experience the internal and external conflict as if first-hand</li> </ul>
<p>2. Readers <b>experience a memorable emotional response</b> - the sense that what the reader feels may be part of his/her emotional life for a long time, he/she may feel moved to take action to mitigate a conflict in the world</p>
<p>3. Readers <b>experience the aesthetic</b> - we find particular aspects of a book very compelling; we feel a desire to linger with or reread portions of the text we find beautiful, well-written, surprising, humorous or moving</p>
<p>4. Readers <b>ponder</b> - we feel a desire to <b>pause and dwell</b> in new facets and twists in the text - we may want to reread in order to think more about certain ideas</p>
<p>5. Readers find ourselves thinking about the book when we're not reading - we <b>generate new ideas and imagine new possibilities</b> in characters' lives; our ideas are original, but related to the text</p>
<p>6. Readers <b>advocate and evaluate</b> - we may follow one character or plot element more intensively and may have the sense of being "behind" the character(s) or narrator - we want events to evolve in a particular way</p>
<p>7. Readers <b>recognize patterns and symbols</b> - we may experience a moment of insight or begin to use our knowledge of literary tools to recognize themes, motifs as well as symbols and metaphors in stories</p>
<p>8. Readers <b>extrapolate</b> from details in the text - we arrive at <b>global conclusions from focal points</b> in the text - these conclusions may reach beyond the scope of the text to other people, events, settings -- we may feel an urge to take action to solve a problem or act on an issue in our community</p>
<p>9. Readers <b>evaluate the author's intentions, values and claims</b> - we actively study the author's style and may choose to replicate it in our writing; we are aware of how he/she manipulates our thinking with tools such as diction, foreshadowing and metaphor; we sometimes argue with the author; we discern and evaluate the author's success in making the book credible and we are attuned to ways in which he/she affirms or changes our <b>beliefs, values and opinions</b>.</p>
<p>10. Readers <b>remember</b> - we develop a sense of permanence that comes with deeply understanding something - we know that we'll be able to use a concept we understand in a new situation</p>

## The Outcomes of Understanding in Expository Text

<b>Thinking patterns that characterize deeper comprehension (expository text)</b>
<p>1. Learners <b>imagine themselves in real world situations, immersed in ideas</b>. We have compelling questions. We take on the role of scientist, social scientist, mathematician.</p> <p>We:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• begin to <b>understand thought leadership</b> - we explore and seek to understand the lives of those who have made significant contributions to a field and begin to imagine how we might make contributions</li> <li>• <b>understand the problems that led to discoveries and new solutions</b> in the scientific, technological or social scientific world - we have a sense of the elements that make a situation problematic and some sense of the steps to be taken to solve the problem</li> </ul>
<p>2. Learners <b>experience a memorable emotional response</b> - we feel a passion to learn more, compassion for others that may be affected by a problem and may be moved to take action to mitigate a conflict in the world</p>
<p>3. Learners <b>experience the aesthetic</b> - we feel a sense of wonder about the complexities and nuances related to a concept we are learning - we may feel compelled to reread portions and dig more deeply into the topic</p>
<p>4. Learners <b>revisit and rethink</b> - we choose to re-read or explore other texts in order to learn more about a concept - we feel that we want to review and rethink a concept</p>
<p>5. Learners <b>generate our own hypotheses and theories</b> about why and how things happen in the natural and social world; we check those hypotheses against those that have been tested</p>
<p>6. Learners <b>direct our energy to comprehending to a few ideas of great import</b> - we develop a sense of what matters most, what is worth remembering, and have the confidence to focus on important ideas rather than details that are unimportant to the larger text - we <b>evaluate the information</b> and make decisions about credibility or bias in what we read</p>
<p>7. Learners <b>recognize patterns and text structures including</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>cause/effect</b> - we use our background knowledge to discern how events affect each other</li> <li>• <b>comparisons and contrasts</b> - we develop a sense of how concepts are similar and different</li> <li>• <b>chronology</b> - we sense the general order of development or the progression of a series of ideas</li> </ul> <p><b>problem/solution</b> - when a problem is introduced, we begin to consider solutions and/or to anticipate solutions that may be presented in the text; we anticipate new problems and solutions related to earlier ones</p>
<p>8. Learners <b>create schema</b> -- we realize how newly learned concepts "fit" into existing background knowledge, that we can make sense in relation to what is already known - that our existing knowledge is accurate or inaccurate (and needs to be revised) - we look to a variety of sources to complete schema when we recognize that it is missing</p>
<p>9. Learners <b>recognize the influence of beliefs/values/opinions</b> - we may experience a sense of affirmation of existing beliefs/values/opinions and/or sense newly developing beliefs/values/opinions related to the text - we can give evidence to support them</p>
<p>10. Learners <b>remember</b> - we develop a sense of permanence that comes with deeply understanding something - we know that we'll be able to use a concept they understand in a new situation</p>

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## Dimensions of Understanding

### Behavioral Markers of Deep Understanding

Behaviors associated with understanding (what we might observe in the classroom when children are understanding)

- Readers are **deeply engaged** - we experience a sense that the world around has disappeared and we are subsumed by the world of the text -- we choose to **focus** on particular ideas for longer periods of time, we may need to focus in silence and/or in conversation with others -- we **apply fervent attention** - we can observe others concentrating with a focus that is nearly impenetrable
- Readers **want to take action in the world based on what they have read** - through discussions, writing, drama or art we feel an urge to do something or act in some way to mitigate or resolve related conflicts in the world; we can talk about how a book changed us, caused us to think and act differently in our own lives -- we may want to **leave a written, artistic or dramatic legacy** - we want to make an observable contribution to the world around them based on what we read
- Readers **show willingness to struggle** - we choose to challenge ourselves in order to understand more deeply - we consciously fight any influence of negative self-judgment, seek, with a sense of efficacy to solve complex problems
- Readers can **describe our progress as readers** -- we can describe their own processes, preferences and progress as a reader - we can describe, for example, how we used a comprehension strategy and how such use improved our understanding -- we **define and describe how our thinking has changed** and can ascribe those changes to the use of comprehension strategies or other factors
- Readers **engage in rigorous discourse** - we speak with others in order to develop deeper understanding and/or defend our ideas - we remain open to **multiple** perspectives and consider others' ideas seriously, often integrating them into our own background knowledge -- we **argue/defend** - we may discuss, challenge others' ideas and beliefs and/or defend our own with evidence from the text and from background knowledge (schema)
- Readers are **renaissance learners** - we meander among a wide range of topics, interests, genres, authors, pursue study in areas we find compelling or aesthetically rewarding -- we **pursue a compelling question** - we may decide to tackle a topic of intense interest in order to build a knowledge base, satisfy curiosity

- Readers **experience insight** - we experience and can describe a moment of clarity, of “seeing” for the first time, possibly due to our efforts to recognize patterns and structures in text
- Readers **remember** - we reapply previously learned concepts and ideas in new learning situations

## **Making the Dimensions and Outcomes Come Alive in the Classroom**

In order to help children become deeply engaged and experience a sense that the world around has disappeared and they are subsumed by the world of the text:

- Model -- talk with students about times when you have learned with an intensity that propelled you to a higher level of understanding - tell them about the circumstances - were you studying something about which you were passionately interested? What made you take intellectual risks you hadn't taken before? What was the payoff - what did you understand that you didn't understand before working fervently?
- Talk about developing areas of passionate interest - such passions don't come automatically to all kids - use individual conferences and small group meetings to help kids find the ideas that most interest them, talk with them about how to pursue topics of passionate interest - how do you do it in your own life - how might they do it?  
If we want children to **dwell** in ideas, choose to focus on one idea for a long period of time, they may need to focus in silence:
- Set aside some chunks of class time for focused, silent work in which students can concentrate on more deeply understanding one idea - when they have time to listen to themselves think and consider subtleties rather than rushing to memorize the next thing.
- Model how proficient readers frequently re-read and re-think portions of text - kids often think that re-reading means starting at the beginning and re-reading everything - show them how readers pick and choose among the portions of text they choose to explore more deeply.
- Teach kids about meta-cognition - thinking about one's own thinking - and the seven most common meta-cognitive strategies.

If we want children to embrace **struggle** and the insight to which it often leads:

- Create learning opportunities in which you purposefully ask students to tackle a more complex idea or text and provide more support for their learning than usual - teach them how we break apart or analyze complex problems in order to approach them in a systematic way, and model ways in which you take on a complex text or issue if your goal is to understand it deeply.
- Help kids understand that insights that come as a result of struggle are often more gratifying than memorizing facts.
- Talk about the role (positive and negative) self-criticism plays in learning about complex ideas - think about ways in which learners overcome.

We can help children learn to define and describe how their thinking has changed and how to **manipulate** their thinking to understand more completely:

- Think aloud about how you use comprehension strategies as tools to help you understand more effectively - how do you question, for example, to help you focus on a section of text that is complex or meaning-laden?

- Ask kids to apply the strategies and keep records of their thinking (records of using strategies) so that you can assess their developing understanding - these can be as simple as post it notes or as complex as self-assessments of group discussions.
- Talk with students about how books have changed your thinking, emotions, beliefs and values - how have books and ideas inspired you to take particular actions in your community - in what ways do books and ideas change students' thinking - what actions do they take in their community as a result of their evolving ideas?
- Ask students to create a timeline of their evolving thinking and the changes they experience in their knowledge and beliefs throughout a unit of study or on a particular concept.

**If we hope that children recognize the influence of beliefs/values/opinions:**

- We can think aloud to show how our own beliefs influence and are altered by text and new conceptual learning.
- We can think aloud to show how decisions we make (for example, inferences we make or decisions about which ideas are most important in a particular passage) are affected, at least in part, by our values, opinions and beliefs.
- We can help children become more aware of their beliefs and opinions and help them to use writing and oral language to discover opinions they may not have known they have.

**If we want children to act as Renaissance learners, to develop and pursue a compelling question, tackle a topic of intense interest in order to build a knowledge base, satisfy curiosity:**

- We can use a wide variety of materials across genres to help students understand complex ideas - use "way in" texts to work toward more complex or didactic readings.
- We can encourage student choice and ownership in pursuing questions and texts of particular interest to them.
- We can create time for students to pursue particular areas of interest within your topic or content area - move beyond the idea that all students must study the same thing at the same time.

**If we want to see children engage in rigorous discourse, speaking with others in order to develop a deeper understanding and/or to defend their ideas:**

- We must think aloud and model to show students that we understand ideas most deeply when we "do" something with those ideas, that discussion in which students become familiar with other learners' perspectives has a significant influence on the degree to which they understand complex ideas.
- We should create time for students to discuss ideas in different configurations - whole class, small groups, partners - we might ask students to reflect on how their thinking changed because of the perspectives others shared in discussion.

**If we want students to experience the aesthetic, to feel a desire to linger with or reread portions of the text or the events that he/she finds beautiful or moving:**

- We can use materials, topics and genres that capitalize on the impact of ideas and policies on people and model ways in which those materials and topics affect us as learners - we can think aloud about what we remember because of an emotional or aesthetic impact.

**If, ultimately, we want students to remember, for experiences to become potently memorable to us.**

- Focus, focus, focus - make decisions about which concepts matter most for students - don't be afraid to concentrate your instruction (thinking aloud, modeling, demonstrating) on far fewer concepts over a much longer period of time, giving kids an opportunity to work with the concepts and apply them in a variety of texts and contexts.

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# A Year And A Day

by [Edwidge Danticat](#) January 17, 2011



In the Haitian vodou tradition, it is believed by some that the souls of the newly dead slip into rivers and streams and remain there, under the water, for a year and a day. Then, lured by ritual prayer and song, the souls emerge from the water and the spirits are reborn. These reincarnated spirits go on to occupy trees, and, if you listen closely, you may hear their hushed whispers in the wind. The spirits can also hover over mountain ranges, or in grottoes, or caves, where familiar voices echo our own when we call out their names. The year-and-a-day commemoration is seen, in families that believe in it and practice it, as a tremendous obligation, an honorable duty, in part because it assures a transcendental continuity of the kind that has kept us Haitians, no matter where we live, linked to our ancestors for generations.

By this interpretation of death, one of many in Haiti, more than two hundred thousand souls went *anba dlo*—under the water—after the earthquake last January 12th. Their bodies, however, were elsewhere. Many were never removed from the rubble of their homes, schools, offices, churches, or beauty parlors. Many were picked up by earthmovers on roadsides and dumped into mass graves. Many were burned, like kindling, in bonfires, for fear that they might infect the living.

“In Haiti, people never really die,” my grandmothers said when I was a child, which seemed strange, because in Haiti people were always dying. They died in disasters both natural and man-made. They died from political violence. They died of infections that would have been easily treated elsewhere. They even died of chagrin, of broken hearts. But what I didn’t fully understand was that in Haiti people’s spirits never really die. This has been proved true in the stories we have seen and read during the past year, of

boundless suffering endured with grace and dignity: mothers have spent nights standing knee-deep in mud, cradling their babies in their arms, while rain pounded the tarpaulin above their heads; amputees have learned to walk, and even dance, on their new prostheses within hours of getting them; rape victims have created organizations to protect other rape victims; people have tried, in any way they could, to reclaim a shadow of their past lives.

My grandmothers were also talking about souls, which never really die, even when the visual and verbal manifestations of their transition—the tombstones and mausoleums, the elaborate wakes and church services, the *desounen* prayers that encourage the body to surrender the spirit, the mourning rituals of all religions—become a luxury, like so much else in Haiti, like a home, like bread, like clean water.

In the year since the earthquake, Haiti has lost some thirty-five hundred people to cholera, an epidemic that is born out of water. The epidemic could potentially take more lives than the earthquake itself. And with the contagion of cholera comes a stigma that follows one even in death. People cannot touch a loved one who has died of cholera. No ritual bath is possible, no last dressing of the body. There are only more mass graves.

In the emerging lore and reality of cholera, water, this fragile veil between life and death for so many Haitians, has become a feared poison. Even as the election stalemate lingers, the rice farmers in Haiti's Artibonite Valley—the country's breadbasket—are refusing to step into the bacteria-infected waters of their paddies, setting the stage for potential food shortages and more possible death ahead, this time from hunger. In the precarious dance for survival, in which we long to honor the dead while still harboring the fear of joining them, will our rivers and streams even be trusted to shelter and then return souls?

A year ago, watching the crumbled buildings and crushed bodies that were shown around the clock on American television, I thought that I was witnessing the darkest moment in the history of the country where I was born and where most of my family members still live. Then I heard one of the survivors say, either on radio or on television, that during the earthquake it was as if the earth had become liquid, like water. That's when I began to imagine them, all these thousands and thousands of souls, slipping into the country's rivers and streams, then waiting out their year and a day before reëmerging and reclaiming their places among us. And, briefly, I was hopeful.

My hope came not only from the possibility of their and our communal rebirth but from the extra day that would follow the close of what has certainly been a terrible year. That extra day guarantees nothing, except that it will lead us into the following year, and the one after that, and the one after that. ♦

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