

STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT COMPREHENSION IN EARLY LITERACY

Focusing on comprehension with beginner-level students can seem challenging. When students are just beginning to learn how to read, it can feel overwhelming to add comprehension activities. However, beginning levels are actually the best time to start training students to think purposefully about and reflect on what they are reading. Teaching these important skills early on helps students build a strong foundation for successful reading as they take on more challenging texts. This week in the Teacher’s Corner, we will discuss simple strategies for supporting students’ comprehension before, during, and after reading.

BEFORE READING

Setting a Purpose for Reading

Telling students why they are going to read a certain text helps them to focus as they read. If the class is reading a non-fiction book or article, briefly state what information students will learn and what they will do with the information. Similarly, when students will be reading fiction text, state what the story will be about and what you would like students to think about as they read. Doing this gives students something to pay attention to and to reflect on. Below are some example purpose statements for non-fiction and fiction texts.

Purpose Statements	
Non-fiction Text	Fiction Text
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are going to read about the life cycle of a butterfly. You will learn about five steps and use what you learn to create a poster. • Today we will read about how Serena Williams became a famous tennis player. After we read, we will write a list of questions we would like to ask Ms. Williams about her life. • The text we will read is going to teach us about how elephants live. We will learn information about what they eat, how they sleep, and ways that they are sometimes in danger. Then, we will think about ways we can teach other people to protect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are going to read a story today about a boy who looks different from everyone else in his school. We will read about how it makes him feel. As we hear the story, I want you think about how you would feel if you were the boy and what you would want others to know about you. • Today we will read a story about a girl who is planning a very important birthday party for her brother. Many things go wrong in the story, but the girl doesn’t give up. As you read, I want you to think about a time that you kept trying even though something you wanted to do was hard.

elephants and write a letter to a newspaper editor about our ideas.	
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Activating Background Knowledge and Experience

Another effective strategy for increasing comprehension for beginner-level students is to activate their background knowledge and experiences. Before they read a text, ask students what experience they have with a topic or situation that will be presented in the text. For instance, consider the elephant example from the table above. After stating the purpose for reading, you can help students connect to the topic by asking “What do you already know about elephants and how they live?” Students can discuss ideas in pairs or groups of three, or the whole class can share information that is recorded on an idea web on the board or chart paper. This strategy also works with fiction texts. Using the example of the girl who was planning the birthday party, you could ask “Have you ever planned a party for someone? What did you have to buy or do to get ready?” or perhaps, “Have you ever tried to do something and everything went wrong? What happened?” Asking students to thoughtfully consider what they already know or what experiences they can relate to can help them make a personal connection to what they will read.

Pre-Teaching Vocabulary

For students who are just beginning to read, unfamiliar words can be a source of frustration and impede comprehension. While it is not possible – or advisable – to teach students every potentially unfamiliar word before they read, it can be helpful to discuss key terms before reading. If we consider the example of tennis player Serena Williams from the table, it could be helpful for the class to share ideas in a web with the word *tennis* written in the middle. On lines around the word *tennis*, phrases like *equipment used to play* or *action words* can be added. Then, students and the teacher can share words they know such as *racquet*, *ball*, *net* or *serve*, *hit*, and *swing*. Illustrations can also be added to the words. A web can be completed for fiction texts as well. For the example of the boy who is different from his peers, the web might contain emotions or feeling words that students would encounter as they read.

DURING READING

Note-Taking Guides and Graphic Organizers

Another way to support reading comprehension is to provide students with a graphic organizer or guide for recording information as they read. For beginner-level students, these guides should be fairly simple. For instance, a non-fiction guide for the life cycle of a butterfly example might look like this:

Name of the Step	What happens?	Draw a picture
1:		
2:		
3:		
4:		
5:		

For a fiction text, such as the one about the boy who is different or the story about the girl planning a party, a simple Beginning-Middle-End graphic organizer is appropriate for beginning readers. Guiding questions and page numbers can be included or omitted depending on the type of support students need. Here is an example:

<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Beginning: pages 1-5</u></p> <p>What has happened to the character? How does the character feel at this part of the story?</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Middle: pages 6-10</u></p> <p>What went wrong? How does the character feel at this part of the story?</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>End: pages 10-15</u></p> <p>Did the character fix the problem? How? How does the character feel now?</p>	

Students can start to complete guides and graphic organizers with illustrations and words and eventually write phrases and full sentences as their proficiency increases.

AFTER READING

The graphic organizers above can help students collect information as they read. They can then use this information to complete meaningful activities after reading. Here are a few ideas about post-reading activities for beginner-level students.

Making Maps or Informational Posters for Non-Fiction Texts

After students have read a non-fiction text and used a note-taking guide to collect information, they can use the guide to make a map or poster about the topic. This activity works well as a group activity. Have students start by writing the title or topic in the center of a large piece of paper. For instance, a group working on the text about elephants would write *How Elephants Live* in the center. Then, group members work together to determine what information to include on the map or poster. Sub-topics might include *habitat, families, diet, and dangers*. Then, students can add details from the text and illustrations under each sub-topic. To extend this further, students can present their maps or posters to the class or other small groups.

Scaffolded Writing

An excellent way to support reading comprehension is to ask students to write about what they have read. As noted above, students can use their note-taking guides or graphic organizers as a tool to support their writing. The teacher can model completing the writing exercise first and provide sentence frames to support students' writing. Non-fiction and fiction texts will lend themselves to different types of prompts, but both are a great way to help beginner-level learners practice their decoding, spelling, sight word vocabulary, and sentence formation. Examples are shown below.

<p><u>Non-Fiction: Life Cycle of a Butterfly</u></p> <p>Prompt: Write a paragraph that tells what happens in each of the five steps in the life cycle of a butterfly.</p> <p>There are ____ steps in the _____ life cycle. The first step is called _____ and it is when _____</p>	<p><u>Fiction: The Boy Who Was Different</u></p> <p>Prompt: Write about a time when you felt different. Tell what happened and how you felt.</p> <p>I felt different when _____</p> <p>_____. I felt different because _____.</p>
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<p>_____ . The second step is _____ and it is when _____ .</p> <p>The third step is _____ and it is when _____ . Etc.</p>	<p>This made me feel _____ because _____ .</p>
<p>Non-Fiction: How Serena Williams Became Famous</p> <p>Prompt: What events led to Serena Williams becoming a famous tennis player? Tell about at least three events in her life that helped her become famous.</p> <p>_____ worked very hard to become _____ . First, she _____ . Next, she _____ . Then, she _____ . These things helped her to become a famous tennis player because _____ .</p>	<p>Fiction: Planning a Birthday Party</p> <p>Prompt: Think about the steps the character took to plan the party. What did she try to do and what went wrong?</p> <p>_____ tried to plan a _____ party for her _____. First, she _____ , but then _____ . Next, she _____ , but that didn't work because _____ . Then she _____ , but _____ . She felt _____ , but the party was a success anyway because _____ .</p>

As with the maps or posters, a nice extension for this activity is to have students share their writing with the class, a partner, or a small group. Also, these kinds of responses can be completed in a journal or a writing notebook. This is a great way to look back and see how much progress students have made as their literacy continues to develop.

This month's Teacher's Corner has focused on several activities that can help beginner-level students develop literacy skills. The activities presented support both receptive and productive literacy skills, and it should be emphasized that these two types of skills support each other. It is important to remember that consistent and frequent practice with letter sounds and activities that support reading are critical to helping beginners become fluent readers and effective writers.