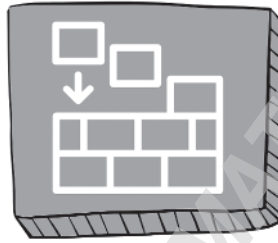


CHAPTER 1

WHAT READING REALLY IS



Foundations of Reading

Lay the groundwork for understanding the core principles of reading and establishing a successful reading environment.

Reading is a deeply personal journey intertwined with our identity and experiences. It goes beyond the mechanics of fluency, decoding, and morphology, encompassing a rich tapestry of thoughts, emotions, and reflections. True reading is an immersive experience, an interplay between the text and the reader's mind. As educators, our goal is not merely to produce students who can read words accurately but to cultivate individuals who think critically, connect deeply, and reflect meaningfully on what they read. This chapter is a call to action for teachers to build a classroom culture that celebrates and nurtures these profound aspects of reading.

The essence of reading lies in the unique relationship each student forms with a text. While foundational skills like phonics and vocabulary are essential, they are just the starting point. Reading must be seen as an active process where students engage with the material, draw upon their experiences, and construct new understandings. Teachers play a crucial role in this process by fostering an environment where students feel confident and motivated to explore texts beyond their surface meanings. Doing so, teachers help students become readers and thinkers who approach texts with curiosity and insight.

True reading is an immersive experience, an interplay between the text and the reader's mind.

Creating a culture of reading in the classroom starts with recognizing and valuing each student's reading journey. It is vital to encourage students to see themselves as readers, regardless of their current skill level. This belief forms the foundation for developing strong, independent readers.

Teachers must emphasize that reading is an act of thinking, where comprehension involves connecting with the text, visualizing, questioning, and applying it to one's life. This holistic approach to reading empowers students to see the relevance of their reading and inspires a lifelong love of learning.

This chapter explores strategies and techniques to help you, as an educator, inspire and develop critical thinkers through reading. By integrating thoughtful questioning, modeling deep comprehension, and fostering reflective discussions, you can transform your classroom into a vibrant community of readers. Together, let's embark on this journey to redefine what it means to be a reader and elevate the role of reading in our students' lives.

Chapter 1 Objectives



The readers will learn that reading is not merely decoding words but involves active thinking, making connections, and comprehending the text on a deeper level.



The readers will gain the ability to distinguish between merely recalling information from a text (consumption) and making meaningful connections and understanding (comprehension).



The readers will learn methods to help students see themselves as capable readers, regardless of their decoding skills, by emphasizing the importance of thinking and personal connections in the reading process.

Reading Is Thinking

We as teachers must refrain from asking our students to come into our classrooms understanding what reading is. And yes, even if you are a 5th or 6th-grade teacher, that is still an assumption we should not make. I know if you ask your students, “What is reading?” they would probably say, “It’s when you open a book and read the words.” That’s the answer that we’re going to get. But is that reading? Is being a strong reader all about being a master decoder? Or does it mean we have the best fluency or strongest vocabulary? These are all literacy factors and have an impact, but in the end, none matters unless one key factor is present. “Sounding out or decoding words is part of the reading puzzle, but falls short of real reading. If children don’t understand what they read, they’re not really reading. If they don’t unlock meaning as they read, the words are boring babble and they will never read well or enjoy reading.”¹ At the beginning of the year, we have to make sure that we are spending time explaining to all of our students what reading really means.

One of the biggest roadblocks to student success in reading is confidence and belief in themselves. Many students do not see themselves as readers—whether that is because they are still struggling to decode or they simply don’t enjoy reading for pleasure. Teachers must ensure that all students see themselves as readers before we can ever reach them all. Teachers need to ensure that students know from the beginning of the year that reading is a personal experience. They need to know that reading is all about who they are as students, as people, and what they bring to the table. If we can explain this and help them understand that they are a reader right now, at this very moment, and what they know in their brain and what they’ve done in their life makes them a reader, then we can help them understand that they are a reader right now. What you know in your brain and what you’ve done in your life make you a reader.

Explaining this to students will increase their confidence. It will give them the self-esteem boost they need to tackle the year successfully. It will set them off on the right path during that year and help build them up as readers. By focusing on “What Is Reading” at the beginning of the year, you’re helping to set that purpose for the year. You’re helping to

¹ Zimmermann, S. and Hutchins, C. (2003). *7 Keys to Comprehension: How to Help Your Kids Read It and Get It!* Three Rivers Press.

build strong and independent readers. It's something that teachers need to take time to discuss and explain. You need to show your students that everyone can be a reader.

"Reading and comprehension are two different concepts. Some children can read but don't understand what they just read. It is our job to help them break down the walls of comprehension."

-Christina McNally, 3rd Grade, Roosevelt Wilson Elementary, Texas

Here is where I might lose some of you, and that's okay. I promise to try and win you over as you keep reading. To be a reader, it does not matter if a student struggles with fluency. It does not matter if they can't decode words. It doesn't matter if they don't know a single sight word. Students can still be readers. How? Because reading is thinking. And I think this is one of the biggest and least spoken-about pieces of literacy. It's not JUST about the words. Reading is thinking. It's inside our brains. It's combining all of our knowledge and understanding from that text with what the author has given us and thinking about what you just read.

Even readers who can't read the words themselves but are being read to can do the thinking part, which is the most critical part. I always love to say that your struggling readers can be your most exceptional thinkers. Don't disregard the fact that kids struggle to read the words. That's only part one. We must ensure that we teach our students from day one that reading is all about thinking. It's not JUST about the words. "Real comprehension has to do with thinking, learning, and expanding a reader's knowledge and horizons. It has to do with building on past knowledge, mastering new information, connecting with the minds of those you've never met."²

"I now see comprehension as important as decoding."

-Jennifer Rothstein, 3rd Grade, Jewish Academy of Fine Arts, Maryland

It's okay if students struggle with the words. Teachers can help with that, but that's not the most essential part. The most important part is thinking while you read the words. Teaching students this concept from day one will help set all of your struggling readers, exceptional

² Zimmermann, S. and Hutchins, C. (2003). *7 Keys to Comprehension: How to Help Your Kids Read It and Get It!* Three Rivers Press.

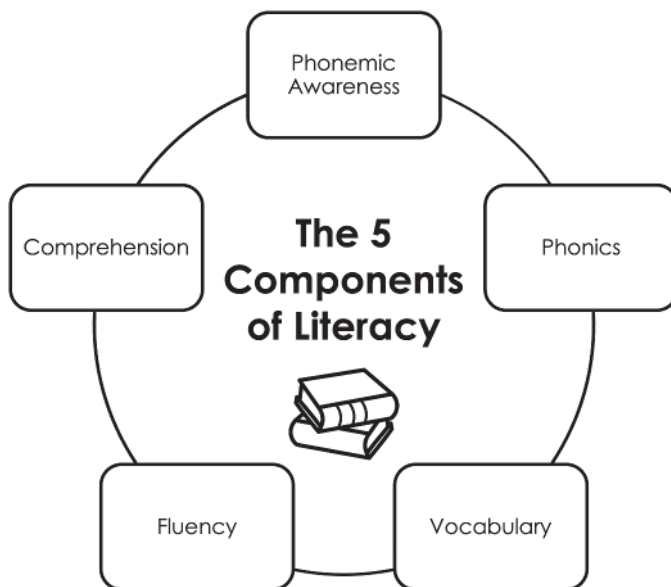
readers, and everybody in between on the right path. It's okay if students struggle at reading words. That will come with time. But they can think. They can think, connect to that text, visualize the text that the teacher is reading to them, ask questions about that text, and do all these strategies to better their comprehension, and that is what makes them a reader.

When you teach that to your students, especially your struggling and striving readers, you know they will have a confidence boost they won't get from anything else. They're going to see that they already have what they need. It's not something they will learn in two or three years down the road. They've already got it. They can think. Now, when I teach this year, we will improve our thinking. It will be a huge stepping stone toward literacy that your students already have. So when they see that they are a reader already, and we will make them better readers, who wouldn't want to hear that message?



Reflect: What is reading?

Five Components of Literacy



In the pursuit of literacy, the ultimate goal is for all students to comprehend texts on a deeper level. While each literacy component is crucial, comprehension and thinking are paramount to achieving this objective. A comprehensive understanding of a text requires more than just the ability to read words; it necessitates the ability to think critically about what is being read. Therefore, while all literacy components are necessary, the emphasis on comprehension and thinking is vital to genuinely developing proficient readers. The following sections quickly review the five essential components of literacy.

Component 1: Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness is the most foundational literacy skill. It involves recognizing that individual sounds, or phonemes, construct words, making it an auditory skill that predicts reading abilities. This skill is typically introduced in preschool and continues to be essential throughout the school years. It lays the groundwork for understanding how sounds form words, setting students up for success in their future reading endeavors. Students may need more advanced literacy skills with a solid foundation in phonemic awareness.

Component 2: Phonics

While often confused with phonemic awareness, phonics is distinctly different. Phonemic awareness is about sounds; phonics involves the systematic relationship between letters (graphemes) and sounds (phonemes). This relationship is critical for decoding words essential for reading, spelling, and writing. Phonics instruction enables students to understand how letters combine to form words, making it a crucial step in developing reading proficiency.

Component 3: Fluency

Fluency refers to the ability to read text accurately, quickly, and with proper expression. It transforms reading from a mechanical process into an enjoyable and meaningful activity.

Fluency acts as a bridge within the five components, connecting the ability to decode words with the ability to read smoothly and effortlessly. In analyzing the association between fluency and comprehension, an article by Frankel et al. argued that speed and accuracy of word reading tie fluency to word identification, and prosody ties fluency to comprehension.³ When students achieve fluency, they can focus on understanding the text rather than decoding each word, making reading a more engaging experience.

Component 4: Vocabulary

Vocabulary encompasses the words a person knows and uses in listening, reading, and writing. It builds on background knowledge, schema, and life experiences. A robust vocabulary is essential for understanding texts, as it equips students with the words they need to comprehend diverse materials. Expanding students' vocabulary enhances their ability to engage with and understand the content they encounter, thus supporting overall comprehension.

Component 5: Comprehension

Comprehension is the pinnacle of reading—the ability to understand and interpret the meaning of a text. This skill is the overall objective of reading. Students with solid comprehension can derive meaning from texts and apply this understanding to their lives. Comprehension is the culmination of all the other literacy components; it combines phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and vocabulary into a cohesive ability to understand and engage with texts.

³ Frankel, K.K., Becker, B.L.C., Rowe, M.W., and Pearson, P.D. (2016). "What Is Reading?" to what is literacy? *The Journal of Education* 196 (3): 7–17. Sage Publications, Inc. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26612624>.

Despite the importance of the five literacy components, many teachers find that their students still struggle with comprehension. A study published in *Reading Psychology* discusses the persistent difficulties students face with reading comprehension, even when foundational literacy components like phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency are taught. The study emphasizes that while these foundational components are crucial, many students, especially struggling readers, continue to have challenges in understanding text, suggesting that more targeted interventions are needed to improve comprehension outcomes.⁴ Additionally, another study published in *Reading and Writing* analyzed reading interventions for upper elementary students and found that while interventions focused on fluency and word recognition can improve certain aspects of reading, comprehension often remains a challenge, especially when students lack the ability to connect prior knowledge to new material.⁵

This often happens because the critical element of thinking is missing from instruction. Teaching students to think as they read is essential for deep understanding. Students need to foster critical thinking to decode and read texts fluently, but they will not fully grasp the meaning or implications of what they read. Thus, while the five literacy components are foundational, integrating thinking into literacy instruction is crucial for developing proper comprehension skills. The following table shows how each literacy component supports the overall goals of deeper comprehension.

⁴ Magableh, I.S.I. and Abdullah, A. (2021). The impact of differentiated instruction on students' reading comprehension attainment in mixed-ability classrooms. *Interchange* 52: 255–272. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10780-021-09427-3>.

⁵ Jefferson, R.E., Grant, C.E., and Sander, J.B. (2016). Effects of Tier 1 differentiation and reading intervention on reading fluency, comprehension, and high stakes measures. *Reading Psychology* 38 (1): 970124.

Component	Description	Support for Comprehension
Phonemic Awareness	Recognition and manipulation of individual sounds (phonemes) that construct words	Lays the foundation for decoding, crucial for reading words correctly
Phonics	Systematic relationship between letters (graphemes) and sounds (phonemes)	Decoding ability allows readers to recognize words accurately
Fluency	Ability to read text accurately, quickly, and with proper expression	Fluent reading frees cognitive resources for understanding text
Vocabulary	The bank of words a person knows and uses in listening, reading, and writing	Rich vocabulary enhances understanding of complex texts
Comprehension	Ability to understand and interpret the meaning of a text	Combines all components to enable understanding and interpretation of texts, fostering critical thinking

Explanation

The previous table highlights how each component contributes to achieving the ultimate goal of reading comprehension.

- **Phonemic Awareness** is foundational. It ensures that students can recognize and manipulate sounds, which is essential for decoding words.
- **Phonics** builds on this by teaching the relationship between letters and sounds, which is crucial for accurate word recognition.
- **Fluency** allows for smooth and expressive reading, freeing cognitive resources to focus on understanding the text.

- **Vocabulary** is essential for comprehension, providing the necessary words to understand and engage with diverse texts.
- **Comprehension** is the culmination of these components, enabling students to understand, interpret, and think critically about texts.

While the first four components of literacy—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and vocabulary—are essential building blocks, they alone do not guarantee the ultimate goal of reading comprehension. It is possible for students to be proficient in each of these areas yet still struggle with understanding texts, especially as the complexity of reading material increases with age. Gaps in any of the early components can hinder comprehension, but even without those gaps, students may still find themselves unable to engage deeply with the material. This is because comprehension is not just the sum of these parts; it requires higher-order thinking skills, such as making connections, drawing inferences, and synthesizing information. For true comprehension to occur, students must not only be proficient in the foundational skills but also be guided to think critically about the content they are reading. This challenge becomes particularly evident as students advance in their education, where content complexity demands more than just surface-level understanding.

Despite our accumulated knowledge about the vital components of literacy, significant challenges remain in ensuring all students achieve reading proficiency. For example, research highlights that many students experience stagnation in their reading progress around third or fourth grade, a critical period for literacy development. Alarmingly, recent estimates reveal that 64% of fourth graders, including nearly 80% of Black and Hispanic students, are performing at or below proficient levels on standardized reading assessments. This data underscores the persistent gaps in literacy education, particularly for marginalized groups, despite advancements in our understanding of reading comprehension processes.⁶

⁶ Dore, R.A., Amend, S.J., Golinkoff, R.M., and Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2018). Theory of mind: a hidden factor in reading comprehension? *Educational Psychology Review* 30 (3): 1067–1089. Springer Nature. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44956427>.

Reading Consumption vs. Reading Comprehension

I'm going to start with a scenario. I like getting teachers to put themselves in their students' shoes to gain some empathy for what they are going through as new readers. Teachers tend to forget because they're going through the motions. Sometimes, they just forget what being a 10-year-old in a classroom is like. I want you to put yourself in a situation they see themselves in daily. I want you to pretend that you open a book and read yourself 5 to 10 medical terms.

Medical Condition	Explanation
Polyarteritis Nodosa	Polyarteritis nodosa is a rare autoimmune malady characterized by inflammation affecting medium-sized arteries, resulting in the development of nodular lesions within arterial walls. The etiology remains enigmatic but is thought to implicate aberrant immune responses against vascular structures.
Wegener's Granulomatosis (Granulomatosis with Polyangiitis)	Wegener's granulomatosis is an infrequent autoimmune ailment marked by small-to-medium vessel inflammation (vasculitis) impacting various organs, notably the respiratory system, kidneys, and upper airways.
Hemophagocytic Lymphohistiocytosis (HLH)	Hemophagocytic lymphohistiocytosis is a perilous hyperinflammatory syndrome characterized by uncontrolled proliferation and activation of immune cells, resulting in systemic tissue damage and multi-organ dysfunction.
Pulmonary Arterial Hypertension (PAH)	PAH may arise idiopathically or in association with connective tissue disorders, congenital cardiac anomalies, or exposure to specific toxins or medications. Clinical manifestations include dyspnea, fatigue, anginal chest discomfort, syncope, and hemodynamic instability.
Acute Intermittent Porphyría (AIP)	Acute intermittent porphyria is a rare inherited metabolic disorder characterized by deficiencies in enzymes involved in heme biosynthesis, leading to the accumulation of porphyrin precursors in the body.

These are big, fancy words. You're able to read them out loud. You can decode them. You can verbally say them. And as your "teacher," I ask you to read them. After you read them,

I will ask you about the terms: “What were the terms you read? What did you remember?” And because you’re a strong reader, and you place them, you can easily repeat them. Maybe not all of them. Perhaps you can’t remember all 10, but a good majority, you’ll be able to remember.

What is this testing? Is this testing your ability to comprehend or consume the information? When information is regurgitated, is that comprehension? So that’s the big question right now. I want you to understand what comprehension is, proper. Can you repeat what you read, or is it something more?



Reflect: What is comprehension?

Unfortunately, teachers often confuse reading *consumption* with reading *comprehension*. How are they different? Which one might your students be doing when they read? Let’s discuss the difference.

We know that we consume oxygen and food. Consumption involves things that we take in. Reading consumption is when a student can remember facts and details from a text. So when you remember those medical facts and repeat them back, you just consume and regurgitate the information. “When students view reading as an opportunity to construct new knowledge, they use higher order thinking more frequently than students who believe that the goal of reading is to establish only a literal understanding of text to give back to the teacher.”⁷

I wish I could think of a better word for regurgitate because I know it’s a yucky word, but it’s the first word that comes to mind! It’s just that rote recitation of information back to you. I see a detail, and I’m reciting it back. I know a number, and I’m reciting it back. No connection was truly made, and there needed to be a deeper understanding of the text.

⁷ Afflerbach, P., Cho, B., Kim, J., and Crassas, M. (2013). Reading: what else matters besides strategies and skills? *The Reading Teacher* 404–448.

Let's go back to the list of medical terms. If I asked you what those medical terms meant, as teachers, you might understand a few of the terms, but many of them, you probably don't know much more other than how to pronounce the word. There was no connection there. There wasn't any deep understanding of the medical terms.

So when students are consuming, that's what's happening. They're reading the text.

They're able to decode. Their fluency is good, and they can tell you lots of information about that text. But the big missing piece is no connection or deep understanding. The students are only consuming the info instead of comprehending it.

Reading Comprehension is when a student can recall details from a text AND make meaning of them. The first part of the definition is the same as reading consumption, but a second part has been added. This means the information has been taken in and then processed for meaning. It means the reader is not just taking it in and spitting it out. They're taking it in and figuring out what this means to them. There are two levels of comprehension. The first is making meaning, and the second is taking it outside the text and applying that meaning to the reader's life. In that second part, connections have been made to that text, and the information of the text has been used in the reader's life.

Proper deep critical comprehension means that you have taken the information from the text and put it in your brain. You are able to dissect, analyze, and evaluate it to make meaning. Then, you take that meaning and determine if you can make any connections to it to make it a more profound understanding in your brain.

Do you truly understand what this character is going through? Do you know the significance of this event? Have you been able to make a connection? And then, have you applied this understanding to your life somehow? Has it changed your way of thinking? Has it changed a viewpoint or an opinion? Has it impacted different things you think about in the world, or has it made you reflect on specific situations you've lived through?

Unfortunately, I see a lot of consumption in the classroom. Everyone, from teachers to students, administrators, and even those going higher into the Department of Education and curriculum designers, has a skewed definition of comprehension.

As teachers, we want our students to refrain from consuming and regurgitating information. We want them to break it down, evaluate, analyze, apply, make connections, and ask questions. We want them to think deeply about this text, think critically, and figure out what it means to them.



Reflect: What is the difference between consumption and comprehension?

Making Meaning

The latter part of the definition of comprehension is what differentiates consumption from comprehension. It consists of two words: making meaning. Let's break down what that means.

Making meaning is where students can apply the information from the text to their own lives. If they can't connect the text to their lives somehow, it does not have meaning. So, meaning comes from understanding, and understanding comes from experience.

If you have researched the Science of Reading, you know that schema, or background knowledge, is one of the most important things a student brings to the table to comprehend. "As he or she reads, the skilled reader gains access to and integrates relevant knowledge to create a mental model of the text. The informed educator recognizes the importance of background knowledge and designs instruction to activate it, assess it, build it, and facilitate students' connections to it."⁸

Much of a student's ability to read comes from their schema. That is much of the comprehension puzzle, which doesn't come from the text. It comes from the student's

⁸ Hennessy, N.L. (2020). *The Reading Comprehension Blueprint: Helping Students Make Meaning from Text*. Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

ability to THINK and use metacognition to access their brains and use what they already know. A student's experiences, life, the events they've participated in, relationships, the places they've traveled, and everything about them make up one-third of their ability to read and comprehend a text. "Each reader is unique in that he or she possesses certain traits or characteristics that are distinctly applied with each text and situation."⁹ So, if you think backward about that definition of comprehension, it all makes sense now. As a reader, you might be able to read and understand the details. But are you also making meaning of them and connecting them to your schema and background knowledge? Are you understanding and relating to the text due to your background knowledge? And then, are you making meaning and connecting it to your own life?

**Definition:
schema**



A mental framework that a student uses to understand and organize information. This includes their prior knowledge, experiences, beliefs, and skills. In reading, a student's schema helps them make sense of new texts by connecting what they already know with what they are learning, enhancing comprehension and retention.

Schema definition from *The Reading Teacher*: "The process of connecting known information to new information takes place through a series of networkable connections known as schema."¹⁰

Let's examine an example of the difference between reading comprehension and reading consumption. In this example, we'll have Student A and Student B. Let's pretend you, as the teacher, have just read the text and are asking the class a question.

⁹ Pardo, L. (2004). What every teacher needs to know about comprehension. *The Reading Teacher* 66 (8): 272–280.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Sarah's Search

Once upon a time in a small town, there was a girl named Sarah who loved animals more than anything else in the world. She spent her afternoons volunteering at the local animal shelter, helping to feed and care for the animals. One sunny Saturday, as Sarah was walking home from the shelter, she noticed a flyer on a telephone pole. It showed a picture of a dog named Max with the words "MISSING SERVICE DOG" in big, bold letters. The flyer explained that Max was a service dog for Mrs. Thompson, a woman known for her kindness and cheerfulness, often seen with Max by her side.

Sarah felt a pang of concern and decided right then that she would do everything she could to find Max and bring him home.

For the next few days, Sarah searched everywhere. She asked her friends, neighbors, and even strangers if they had seen Max. She posted on social media and handed out flyers at the local park. Just when she was starting to lose hope, she heard a faint barking sound coming from an abandoned house at the edge of town. Following the sound, Sarah cautiously entered the old building and found Max, trapped and scared but otherwise unharmed.

Overjoyed, Sarah carefully led Max out and rushed to Mrs. Thompson's house. When Mrs. Thompson opened the door and saw Max, she burst into tears of relief and happiness. She thanked Sarah over and over, explaining how much Max meant to her.

Teacher: Why were Sarah's actions so significant?

Student A: They were substantial because she could find the missing dog.

Let's analyze this answer: Honestly, that was the correct answer. She found the dog, which was a big deal and a significant event in the story. But is this a reading comprehension answer or a reading consumption answer?

Teacher: Why were Sarah's actions so significant?

Student B: They were substantial because since she could find the dog, she could reintroduce it to its owner, who is physically disabled, and without the dog, she couldn't get around. She was lost, figuratively speaking.

Let's delve deeper into this response: It's clear that the student has comprehended the text. They provided a correct answer and explained the reasoning behind it. For instance, she inferred that the character was lost without her dog, a service animal. If Student B hadn't possessed the schema or background knowledge about physical disabilities and the crucial role of service dogs, she wouldn't have been able to make that inference.

Consider a student with no schema regarding service dogs and no awareness or exposure to people with disabilities, particularly physical disabilities or blindness, where service dogs are essential for mobility. Such a student likely wouldn't grasp the significance of the scenario. They might simply think, "Well, she's happy now that she got her dog back," without understanding the more profound implications. This example highlights the two levels of comprehension rooted in a student's schema. What they bring to the text significantly influences their ability to achieve deep critical comprehension.

In this case, Student A consumed the text while Student B genuinely comprehended it. However, Student A might also have comprehended the text; they just needed to provide more information to demonstrate it. As a teacher, if I received Student A's response, I would engage with them further to extract more details. My goal would be to determine whether they are merely consuming the text or truly comprehending it. To do this, I would ask follow-up questions such as:

"She found the missing dog, but why is that important? What impact did that have on the story? Is that a significant event? Why?"

These questions are designed to probe deeper and assess whether the student is comprehending or simply consuming the text.



Reflect: How can you tell when a student is consuming a text vs. comprehending it? What should you be listening for?

Promoting Comprehension Over Consumption

It all boils down to one crucial aspect: asking the right kinds of questions and expecting more detailed, thoughtful answers. This is fundamentally about the relationship between questions and answers.

Basic questions simply won't suffice. Asking questions like, "Who are the characters?" may be necessary in kindergarten or first grade, but beyond that level, especially in second grade and above, teachers need to move beyond these simplistic inquiries.

For instance, questions such as, “Who was the character’s best friend?” or “Why didn’t they get along?” are examples of basic, regurgitation questions. These are one-sided, closed questions that do not encourage deeper thinking. We need to eliminate such questions from our repertoire. Our time is too valuable to be spent on questions with only one correct answer that leave no room for making inferences, critical thinking, or analysis.

Instead, we should focus on asking questions that challenge students to think critically and engage more deeply with the text. This approach will help develop their ability to analyze, infer, and understand complex concepts, leading to a richer and more meaningful learning experience.

	Open Question	Closed Question
Definition	Open questions are broad and do not have a single correct answer. They encourage students to think critically, analyze information, and express their thoughts and opinions.	Closed questions typically have a specific correct answer, often a yes/no or factual response. They focus on verifying understanding or recalling specific details from the text.
Purpose	Encourages deeper analysis, interpretation, and synthesis of information from the text.	Tests comprehension of explicit information and helps assess whether students have understood specific details or concepts.
Effectiveness	Promotes higher-order thinking skills, encourages creativity, and allows for diverse responses from students.	Useful for assessing basic comprehension skills, factual recall, and verifying understanding of specific information in the text.

Reflecting on the teacher’s question about Sarah and her dog, it’s evident there was only one correct answer. While it could have been phrased differently, arriving at the answer required inferencing, schema, and critical thinking. Closed questions, when used,

must be profound and necessitate a thoughtful process to answer. Alternatively, open-ended questions, which allow for multiple correct answers, encourage deeper student engagement.

Open-ended questions require students to invest time and engage in conversations to arrive at their answers. This process pushes them to evaluate their prior knowledge and analyze the information gathered from the text to formulate a comprehensive response. This method of questioning fosters a richer understanding and a more meaningful connection to the material. We will discuss open-ended questions more deeply later in the book.

So, how can you help your students by providing these more in-depth answers? Here are some strategies:



How do you support your students in providing these more in-depth answers?

- Use tiered questions (like the ones suggested for Student A above) to extract more from the student's answer. Tiered questions help your students think deeper, look for ways to connect, and access schema. They also allow your students to see your expectations for how you want questions to be answered.
- Reflect on how you're modeling answering questions for your students. We should constantly model reading aloud and thinking aloud for our students. In that think-aloud, we should ask ourselves questions and answer them. Within our answers, students will see the depth of the question and the extension of the answer that's needed. You're setting the bar high and keeping it there, supporting your students along the way.

If you only model basic one-answer, one-word, or phrase answers to questions about a text, then that's all they'll think is acceptable. You are also NOT modeling that reading is

thinking. That's what students think is needed to answer questions they are being asked. But if you're modeling going into detail, using evidence, and making inferences, then your students will pick up on what is expected of them when they answer a question.



Open-Ended Questions to ask with any text!

- What do you think the author's message is in this text?
- How do you relate to the characters in the story? Can you connect their experiences to your own life?
- Why do you think the author chose to write this story from the perspective of [a specific character]?
- What emotions did you feel while reading this text? How did the author create those emotions?
- Can you predict what might happen next in the story? What clues from the text support your prediction?
- What questions do you still have about the text? What would you like to learn more about?
- How does the setting of the story influence the events that occur? Can you imagine the story taking place in a different setting?
- What do you think the author wants readers to learn or understand from reading this text?
- Are there any parts of the story that you found confusing or unclear? What strategies could you use to clarify your understanding?
- How does the author use descriptive language to create vivid images in your mind?
- Can you identify any themes or recurring ideas in the text? How are they developed throughout the story?
- If you could change the ending of the story, what would you change and why?
- What lessons or morals can be learned from the experiences of the characters?
- How does the author build suspense or tension in the story? What effect does it have on the reader?
- How do you think the story might be different if it were told from a different character's perspective?





Prepare your questions in advance. You need to know your text and control where you want the text conversation to go. Do this by prepping your open-ended questions in advance!

Reading Strategies vs. Reading Skills

I address reading strategies later in this book, but it is crucial to understand the significant impact that reading strategies have on a child's ability to comprehend compared to reading skills. Research supports the concept that reading strategies make a substantial difference in comprehension. "In teaching comprehension strategies, we focus on how readers can actually get better at reading rather than simply on how they answer questions and retell. Although it remains critically important to focus on content, we now know that teaching children to approach and learn content strategically makes it more likely that they'll understand, retain, and reapply the information."¹¹

This highlights the importance of strategies over skills. While reading skills such as decoding and fluency are foundational, they only sometimes ensure deep comprehension. Conversely, strategies equip students with tools to actively engage with the text, think critically, and make connections. Strategies such as predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing enable students to navigate complex texts and enhance their understanding.

Focusing on strategies also helps students become more independent readers. They learn to monitor their comprehension and employ different techniques when encountering difficulties. This strategic approach to reading fosters a deeper and more meaningful interaction with the text, leading to better retention and the ability to apply knowledge in various contexts.

By emphasizing reading strategies, you prepare your students to become more proficient and thoughtful readers, capable of understanding and analyzing a wide range of texts. This approach ultimately leads to improved comprehension and a lifelong love of reading.

¹¹ Keene, E.O. and Zimmerman, S. (2013). Years later, comprehension strategies still at work. *The Reading Teacher* 66 (8): 601–606.

	Reading Skills	Reading Strategies
Definition	Reading skills are the fundamental abilities or competencies that enable individuals to decode, understand, and interpret written language.	Reading strategies are deliberate, goal-directed techniques or approaches that readers use to comprehend text, extract meaning, and engage with written material effectively.
Purpose	Reading skills provide the necessary building blocks for proficient reading. Decoding skills enable readers to translate written symbols into sounds, while fluency allows for smooth and expressive reading.	Reading strategies help readers actively engage with text, enhance comprehension, and navigate challenges encountered during reading. They empower readers to construct meaning from text by employing cognitive, metacognitive, and affective processes.

Strategies are metacognitive concepts such as visualization, asking questions, synthesizing, and determining importance. These strategies are more impactful than other skills because they actively engage the reader within the strategy itself. They rely on what the reader brings to the text and what the reader is doing in their mind. For instance, readers can only make connections by combining their background knowledge with information from the text. Similarly, visualization requires readers to merge their internal knowledge with the rhetoric from the passage. I talk more about metacognition and metacognitive strategies later in the book.

I refer to reading strategies as “Student-Centric.” This means they keep the reader at the center of their focus, emphasizing the reader’s thoughts while engaging with the text. Focusing significantly on reading strategies is essential if we want our students to be active participants in the reading process.

Remember, reading is THINKING. It is all about the dynamic interaction between the reader and the author. This process involves asking questions, visualizing the story, using background knowledge, and monitoring one’s thoughts through metacognition. Active reading, which improves comprehension, requires active thinking where students simultaneously monitor the text and their cognitive processes.

A student could be the most fluent reader, with excellent decoding skills and a strong vocabulary foundation; however, proper comprehension will only occur by engaging in

the reading process and actively thinking about the text. Reading strategies are essential for fostering this level of active involvement and ensuring that students not only read but truly understand and connect with the material.

Reading Skills	Reading Strategies
Main Idea Author's Purpose Cause & Effect Compare & Contrast Fact & Opinion Genre Plot Point Of View Sequencing Theme Story Elements	Making Predictions Asking Questions Summarizing Visualizing Making Connections Monitoring Comprehension Inferring Evaluating

On the other side is the traditional approach to teaching reading comprehension: reading skills. Reading skills are what I call “Text-Centric,” meaning they prioritize the content within the text as the most crucial element. These skills do not include or involve the reader in any meaningful capacity.

For example, consider teaching the skill of identifying the main idea. This is a one-sided approach focused solely on the text. While understanding the main idea is important, it doesn’t fully engage the reader or encourage them to think critically about what they are reading. True reading comprehension involves more than just extracting information; it requires the reader to be actively engaged and to connect with the text on a deeper level.

To achieve this, you must shift your focus from solely teaching reading skills to emphasizing reading strategies. Reading strategies are designed to make the reader actively participate in the reading process. These strategies involve the reader’s thoughts, background knowledge, and cognitive processes, creating a more prosperous and dynamic interaction with the text.

For instance, while identifying the main idea is essential, you should also teach your students to ask questions about the text, make predictions, visualize scenes, and synthesize information. These strategies help students become more engaged and thoughtful readers, allowing them to better understand and retain information.

While reading skills are essential, to foster true reading comprehension and create active readers, you must prioritize reading strategies. These strategies ensure that the reader is not just passively receiving information but actively engaging with the text, thinking critically, and making meaningful connections. The following table shows a quick example of how you can take a simple reading skill, such as the main idea, and ensure that you take them further to encourage deeper comprehension and more critical thinking.

Traditional Text-Based Skill	Deeper, Reader-Involved Skill	Metacognitive Approach
Objective: Identify the main idea of a passage.	Objective: Understand the main idea and relate it to personal knowledge and experiences.	Objective: Reflect on the process of identifying the main idea and how it enhances understanding.
Activity: Read the passage and find the main idea.	Activity: Read the passage, find the main idea, and connect it to your own experiences or other texts.	Activity: Read the passage, identify the main idea, connect it to prior knowledge, and reflect on how this process aids comprehension.
Questions: "What is the main idea of this passage?"	Questions: "What is the main idea of this passage? How does this idea relate to something you already know?"	Questions: "What is the main idea of this passage? How did you figure it out? How does connecting this idea to your own experiences or knowledge help you understand the text better?"
Example Exercise: "Read the passage and write down the main idea."	Example Exercise: "Read the passage, write down the main idea, and then write a paragraph on how this idea connects to something you have experienced or learned before."	Example Exercise: "Read the passage, write down the main idea, explain how you identified it, and reflect on how this process helped you understand the text. Also, write about how this main idea connects to your prior knowledge or experiences."
Assessment: Correct identification of the main idea.	Assessment: Correct identification of the main idea and a clear connection to personal knowledge or other texts.	Assessment: Correct identification of the main idea, a clear explanation of the identification process, and a reflective connection to personal knowledge or experiences.

This table demonstrates how to move from a simple, text-based skill of identifying the main idea to a more profound, more involved critical thinking skill. This approach engages students more comprehensively and encourages them to reflect on their thinking processes, enhancing their overall comprehension and metacognitive abilities.

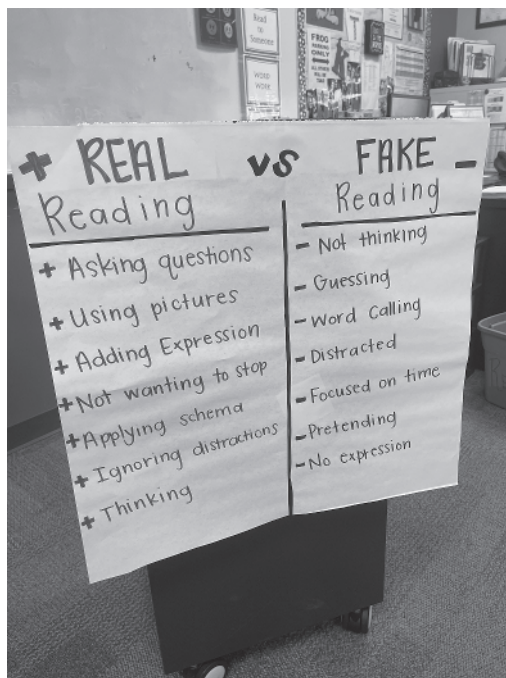
Skills vs. Strategies	
Reading Skills	Reading Strategies
• Reading skills are typically associated with abilities required to answer comprehension questions • Skills are more automatic • Reading skills are usually assessed by a type of question after reading • Skills are very repetitive, involved practice and feedback • Actions associated with reading skills are automatic and routine • Students use a reading skill without even knowing it • Reading skills are practiced within the same manner across multiple situations	• Students are actively thinking about the ideas in the text if they are going to understand • Strategies are not about answers, but about actions readers take to remember the text • Students use reading strategies intentionally to meet a specific goal • Strategies are not learned by repetition, but from teacher think-alouds or modeling • Needs to be based on a complex text so students aren't pretending to practice • Strategies can become skills over time • Strategies are effortful, deliberate, and active involvement

As I said, I discuss reading strategies later in this book, but I wanted to lay down this groundwork because when I discussed the overarching question, “What is Reading?,” I must include reading strategies.

Promoting active involvement in the text is crucial for developing readers who are not merely decoding words but are engaged thinkers. Active reading encourages students to interact with the text on a deeper level, fostering critical thinking and comprehension. By teaching students to use metacognitive strategies, such as questioning, visualizing, and

summarizing, you help them become more aware of their thought processes and how they can be used to enhance understanding. This approach transforms reading from a passive activity into an active and dynamic process, where students are continually interacting with and reflecting on the text.

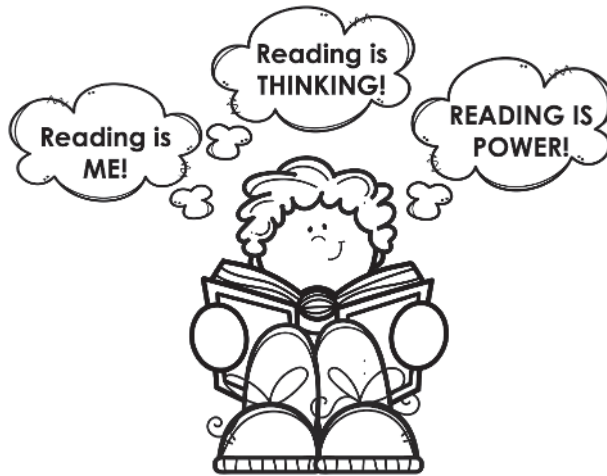
Building Thinking Readers means cultivating individuals who recognize that their brains must be engaged in the reading process. These readers understand that reading involves a give-and-take relationship between themselves and the author. They use strategies when necessary, realizing that comprehension is not automatic but requires active participation and mental effort. By promoting this mindset, you are helping students develop the skills and habits needed for lifelong learning and intellectual engagement. A Thinking Reader is not just a person who reads words on a page but someone who actively constructs meaning, makes connections, and thinks critically about what they read.



What a Thinking Reader Is and Isn't

Aspect	Active Reading	Non-active Reading
Metacognitive Skills	The reader actively monitors comprehension and adjusts strategies as needed.	The reader reads through text without self-monitoring or adjustments.
Critical Thinking	The reader engages deeply, questioning and evaluating the content.	The reader accepts information without deeper analysis or questioning.
Connecting to Prior Knowledge	The reader relates new information to existing knowledge and experiences.	The reader processes information in isolation, without making connections.
Asking Questions	The reader formulates questions to explore and understand the text more deeply.	The reader focuses solely on the text, not considering broader questions.
Visualizing	The reader creates mental images to enhance understanding and memory.	The reader reads the text without forming any mental images.
Summarizing	The reader periodically summarizes key points to reinforce understanding.	The reader moves on without summarizing or reviewing key information.
Making Prediction	The reader anticipates future events or outcomes in the text, staying engaged.	The reader does not think ahead or make predictions about the text.
Reflecting	The reader considers the implications and personal relevance of the text.	The reader finishes the text without reflecting on its meaning or relevance.
Using Fix-Up Strategies	The reader employs strategies like rereading or looking up words to overcome difficulties.	The reader ignores confusion and continues reading without clarification.
Engaging in Discussions	The reader discusses the text with peers, gaining diverse insights and perspectives.	The reader reads alone without discussing or sharing insights.

Reading Is Me, Reading Is Thinking, Reading Is Power



Reading is a multifaceted journey that intertwines personal identity, critical thinking, and the boundless power of discovery. At its core, reading is deeply personal—*Reading Is Me*—as it reflects our unique experiences and perspectives, turning every story into a reflection of who we are. But reading is also an intellectual endeavor—*Reading Is Thinking*—requiring us to engage deeply with texts, analyze ideas, and draw meaningful connections. This active engagement transforms words into understanding and fosters critical thinking. Ultimately, *Reading Is Power*, offering a gateway to knowledge and the tools to explore the world, satisfy curiosity, and grow as lifelong learners. Together, these elements demonstrate that reading is not just a skill but a dynamic process of personal growth, intellectual exploration, and empowerment.

Reading Is Me

Reading is a deeply personal experience, reflecting who we are as individuals. Every reader brings their own schema, or background knowledge, to a text, which shapes

their interpretation and understanding. This means that no two readers will have the same experience with a book, as their personal histories, emotions, and perspectives color their reading. For instance, a story about a family might resonate differently with someone who has a large, close-knit family compared to someone who has grown up in foster care. These unique experiences and perspectives make reading a highly individualized activity.

When students recognize that reading is an extension of themselves, they begin to see it as a reflection of their identity rather than just a school assignment. They start to understand that their personal experiences and knowledge contribute to their reading experience, making it richer and more meaningful. This realization can be incredibly empowering for students, as it validates their individual perspectives and encourages them to engage more deeply with texts. It transforms reading from a chore into a personal journey of discovery and self-reflection.

Reading Is Thinking

Reading is fundamentally an act of thinking, and this cognitive engagement is what makes comprehension possible. Beyond decoding letters and words, reading requires the brain to make connections, analyze information, and draw conclusions. At its core, comprehension involves processing the ideas within a text, relating them to prior knowledge, and constructing meaning. This intricate thinking process transforms reading from a mechanical skill into an intellectual exercise, allowing readers to engage deeply with ideas, infer meaning beyond the surface, and critically evaluate what they read. Without active thinking, words remain static on the page, and true understanding is never achieved.

Thinking is the most powerful aspect of comprehension because it bridges the gap between words and understanding. Comprehension thrives on the reader's ability to question, predict, synthesize, and evaluate as they navigate through a text. This active engagement not only enhances understanding but also fosters empathy, creativity, and critical thinking skills. By thinking through what they read, students can uncover layers of

meaning, grasp complex concepts, and apply knowledge to their own lives. It is this active cognitive involvement that empowers readers to move beyond memorization and into meaningful learning.

Ultimately, teaching students to think as they read is one of the most impactful strategies educators can employ. When we help students become intentional thinkers, we equip them with the tools to approach any text with curiosity and confidence. This approach not only strengthens their comprehension but also cultivates lifelong skills that extend far beyond the classroom, allowing them to navigate and make sense of the increasingly complex world around them.

Reading Is Power

Reading is the key to unlocking the secrets of the universe. It holds immense power because it is a gateway to knowledge and understanding. Everything we want to know about the world around us can be found in books, waiting to be discovered. By reading, we can explore different cultures, learn about historical events, delve into scientific theories, and much more. This vast reservoir of information empowers students, giving them the tools to understand and navigate the world.

To help your students realize the power of reading, you need to create a learning environment that sparks their curiosity and encourages exploration. Curiosity is a driving force behind the power of reading. When students are curious, they are motivated to read and explore new topics. As educators, we can cultivate this curiosity by introducing students to a wide range of reading materials and encouraging them to ask questions and seek answers. By creating an environment where curiosity is valued and nurtured, you can help your students see reading as an exciting and rewarding activity.

Provoking curiosity in students involves providing them with diverse and engaging reading materials that cater to their interests and challenge their thinking. This involves asking thought-provoking questions, providing intriguing experiences, and making reading an integral part of their learning journey. It also means fostering a classroom culture where

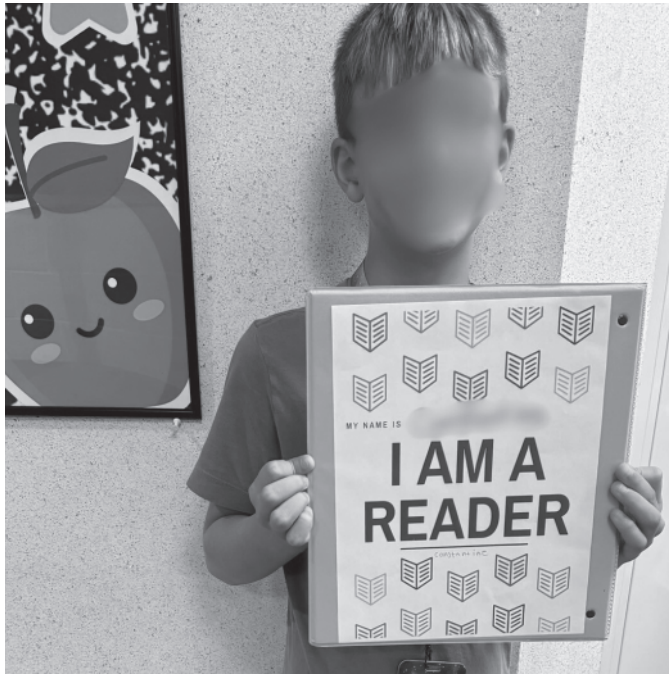
questioning and exploration are encouraged. When students see how reading can answer their questions and expand their horizons, they begin to appreciate its true value. They understand that reading is not just a means to an end but a powerful tool for lifelong learning and personal growth.

Building a Reading Identity

By emphasizing that reading is a personal and powerful experience, you can help students develop a reading identity. This identity is crucial for fostering a love of reading and a commitment to lifelong learning. When students see themselves as readers, they are more likely to engage with texts, seek out new reading materials, and continue reading outside the classroom. This self-perception is essential for their academic success and personal development.

Teachers play a pivotal role in helping students build their reading identities. By validating their experiences, encouraging their curiosity, and showing them the power of reading, teachers can inspire them to become passionate, confident readers. This involves creating a classroom culture that celebrates reading and provides opportunities for students to explore and reflect on their reading experiences. It also means modeling a love of reading and demonstrating how reading can enrich our lives.

Reading is much more than a mechanical skill; it is a deeply personal and powerful experience. By helping students see that reading is thinking, reading is me, and reading is power, teachers can transform their approach to reading and inspire a lifelong love of learning. Through thoughtful engagement, personal connection, and the recognition of reading's immense power, they can develop strong, critical readers who are not only academically successful but also equipped to navigate and understand the world around them. Let us commit to fostering this transformative understanding of reading in our classrooms, ensuring that every student sees reading as an essential and enriching part of their identity and learning journey.



Closing

As I conclude this chapter, it's essential to reflect on the transformative power of fostering a culture of reading in our classrooms. When students begin to see themselves as readers, they embark on a journey that transcends the mechanics of fluency and decoding. They start to understand that reading is a dynamic process of thinking, connecting, and engaging with the world. By nurturing this perspective, we empower our students to become thoughtful, independent readers who can navigate texts with confidence and curiosity.

Reading holds immense power in shaping critical thinkers and lifelong learners. When we emphasize that reading is about thinking deeply, questioning, and making personal connections, we equip our students with the tools to explore and understand complex ideas. This shift in perspective helps students realize that their experiences and reflections

are valuable components of the reading process. By fostering this mindset, we create an environment where students feel motivated to engage with texts and see reading as a meaningful, enriching activity.

"Many children enter school knowing they are able to learn and to enjoy learning. For many reasons, they come up against a lot of hurdles and lose that confidence they had at the eager age of five years. The lessons you teach show me how to help those students to regain their positive self image as a student who is capable of great strides in learning."

-Ann Stern, Grades K-4, Cuba Elementary School, New Mexico

In developing strong, critical readers, we lay the foundation for academic success and personal growth. Our students will not only excel in their studies but also become informed, empathetic individuals capable of making thoughtful contributions to society. As educators, we have the privilege and responsibility to guide our students on this path, helping them discover the joy and power of reading. Let us continue to inspire and support our students in becoming the readers and thinkers they are destined to be.

Consider these questions as you ponder this issue more and try the following lessons.

End of Chapter Reflection Questions:



How do reading strategies take comprehension to the highest level?



How do we effectively model the difference between reading words and reading with your mind (thinking)?



Why is it important to get buy-in at the start of the year?

Lessons to Try

As mentioned in the Introduction, you can access all these lessons for free by visiting <http://www.cieraharristeaching.com/ttrlessons> and using the passcode: literacy for all. This resource provides comprehensive materials and strategies designed to enhance students' academic conversations and critical thinking skills. Don't miss out on this valuable tool to support your literacy instruction!

"Reading Is Me" Lesson

The lesson plan "Reading Is Me!" is designed to help students identify as readers and reflect on their reading habits and attitudes. The lesson begins with a "stand up/sit down" activity where students respond to questions about their reading experiences, fostering self-awareness and group discussion about the diverse nature of reading preferences. This interactive activity sets the stage for students to understand that being a reader is a personal journey and that everyone's experiences and tastes in reading materials are unique.

The core of the lesson involves reading the story "Miss Brooks Loves Books (And I Don't)" and engaging in a discussion using targeted questions. This story provides a relatable context for students who may feel disconnected from reading, showing them that it's normal to not enjoy every book and that finding the right book can be transformative. The discussion questions encourage students to think critically about their reading experiences, understand the character's journey, and relate it to their own lives. This part of the lesson emphasizes the importance of perseverance in finding books that resonate with individual interests and highlights the diverse nature of reading journeys.

The lesson concludes with a creative activity where students define what it means to be a reader and create personal and classroom posters affirming their identities as readers. This visual and tangible affirmation reinforces the idea that everyone can be a reader, regardless of their past experiences or current preferences. By displaying these posters, teachers can create an inclusive and supportive reading environment.



Encourage students to share their personal reading journeys and preferences openly, fostering a classroom culture where all types of reading are valued. This can help students feel more comfortable and motivated to explore different genres and types of books, ultimately enhancing their reading experiences and confidence.

“Reading Is Thinking” Lesson

This lesson plan aims to redefine the concept of reading for elementary students by contrasting “fake reading” with “real reading.” The lesson begins with a teacher reading a short text without demonstrating any thinking or comprehension, followed by a discussion on whether this constitutes reading. Students are encouraged to explore and express their definitions of reading. Through guided questions and activities, they discover that reading involves active engagement, thinking, and interaction with the text. The lesson incorporates a T-Chart activity to distinguish between “fake” and “real” reading behaviors, and students practice these behaviors in pairs.

The importance of this lesson lies in its focus on developing critical thinking and comprehension skills. By highlighting that reading is not merely decoding words but involves understanding, questioning, and connecting ideas, students learn to become more thoughtful and engaged readers. This approach helps to combat the issue of “fake reading,” where students may appear to be reading but are not truly comprehending the material. By instilling these habits early, students are better equipped to handle more complex texts in the future and develop a lifelong love for reading.

Teaching this lesson provides numerous benefits. It fosters an environment where students feel comfortable discussing their thoughts and questions about a text, promoting deeper understanding and retention. Additionally, the collaborative activities enhance social and communication skills as students work together to identify and practice real reading behaviors. Teachers can also use this lesson as a foundation for building more advanced reading strategies throughout the year.



When teaching this lesson, use a variety of texts that are engaging and relevant to your students' interests. This will help to capture their attention and make the concept of real reading more relatable and enjoyable.

"Reading Is Power" Lesson

The "Reading Is Power" lesson plan is designed to illustrate the essential role of reading in empowering individuals through a hands-on activity. In this lesson, students are initially tasked with building a catapult without any instructions, which is expected to be challenging and frustrating. This experience serves as a metaphor for the lack of power that comes with not having access to information. After this initial attempt, students are provided with written instructions and given another opportunity to build the catapult. This time, with the aid of reading, they are expected to achieve greater success and efficiency. The lesson is structured to lead students to the realization that reading provides access to crucial knowledge and skills that are otherwise inaccessible.

The importance of this lesson lies in its clear demonstration of how reading can transform difficult tasks into manageable ones by providing necessary information and guidance. By comparing the two attempts at building the catapult, students experience firsthand the difference that reading can make in understanding and performing tasks. This lesson not only emphasizes the practical benefits of reading but also encourages students to appreciate reading as a powerful tool that can enhance their abilities and broaden their horizons. It aligns with essential questions such as the power of reading over those who do not read and how reading can be a source of knowledge, exploration, and personal growth.

Teaching this lesson offers numerous benefits. It actively engages students in a collaborative and reflective process, fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills. By making the connection between reading and practical success, students are likely to develop a deeper appreciation for reading and be motivated to improve their literacy skills.

Moreover, the lesson incorporates differentiated instruction to cater to various reading levels, ensuring that all students can participate meaningfully.



Ensure to facilitate reflective discussions after each part of the activity, encouraging students to share their insights and connect the lesson to broader real-life contexts. This will help reinforce the understanding that reading is not just a classroom activity but a vital skill for navigating and succeeding in the world.

