

# Nonfiction Reading Power

*Teaching students how to think while they read  
all kinds of information*

Adrienne Gear

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Dedication

*To Spencer and Oliver, with love*

Republished in Australia by



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Code: PBP6883  
ISBN: 9781760016883  
0915

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Printed in Australia

Originally published in 2008 Pembroke Publishers

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# Introduction

I grew up in a generation where the word “comprehension” was associated with comprehension questions: “Read this chapter, then answer the questions.” Comprehension was something we did, not something we learned. The purpose of reading in school was to find the right answers. “And if you don’t understand how to get the answers right, have no fear, just keep practicing! There will be plenty more opportunities for you to get the answers wrong!” In this situation, as in any learning situation, practice does NOT make perfect if no instruction on what “perfect” is has been provided. My teachers did not teach me how to make sense of what I was reading; as long as I could read the words, I was considered a reader.

Sadly, I brought this misguided notion of comprehension with me into my early teaching years and continued to “assign and assess” comprehension questions to my intermediate students. When students did not do well, I certainly felt badly, but I did what my own teachers had done—hand the questions back and ask them to do their corrections. I reflect on this absurd situation with a certain degree of embarrassment. What was I thinking? That, somehow, the second time around, the student would miraculously find the correct answers? Thankfully, research over the past twenty years has guided educators to the realization that comprehension is not something we “do” but something we “teach” and that explicit instruction in comprehension should precede independent practice.

## Comprehension Research

For more than 20 years, educational research has looked at ways to try to determine what good readers do when they read. In his extensive study through the University of Michigan, P. David Pearson determined that proficient readers use specific strategies to make sense of what they are reading (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Over the past several years, this list of reading strategies has been slowly making its way into classrooms, as teachers become more aware of the importance of the explicit instruction in comprehension. These research-based strategies enable a reader to become more engaged and to interact with the text to find meaning. While many proficient readers use these strategies innately, or subconsciously, research points to a more conscious, or metacognitive, approach where readers learn to become more aware of their thinking and are able to “talk through the text.” Equally as important as learning the strategy is developing the “language of thinking” to be able to articulate what strategy was used and how it helped with the comprehension of the text.

### Strategies Used by Proficient Readers

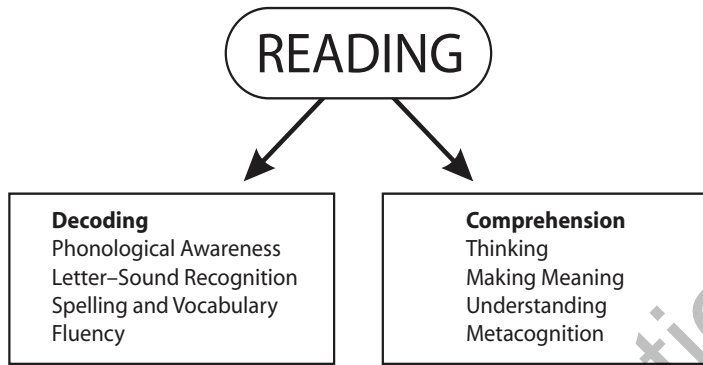
A good reader is **metacognitive**—aware of and able to use and articulate the following strategies in order to interact with the text.

1. **Make Connections.** An active reader is able to draw from background knowledge and personal experiences while reading to help create meaning from the text.
2. **Ask Questions.** An active reader asks both literal and inferential questions before, during, and after reading to clarify and deepen understanding.
3. **Visualize.** An active reader is able to create multi-sensory images in the “mind’s eye” while reading to help make sense of the text.
4. **Draw Inferences.** An active reader knows that not all information is included in a text, and is able to hypothesize and predict what is going to happen next, based on evidence in the text.
5. **Determine Importance.** An active reader sifts through information in the text to select important ideas, choose what to remember, and set priorities.
6. **Analyze and Synthesize.** An active reader is able to break down information and to draw conclusions based on both the text and his or her own thinking.
7. **Monitor Comprehension.** An active reader is aware when understanding is being compromised and is able to stop, go back, and reread in order for understanding to occur.

(Based on the research of P. David Pearson)

Research shows that, for very few students, the ability to comprehend is a natural result of decoding.

Many educators in the field of comprehension instruction, including Stephanie Harvey, Anne Goudvis, Debbie Miller, and Ellin Keene, have based much of their practice on David Pearson’s research. Their work reflects the complexity of comprehension, and its being a separate, yet equally important, aspect of reading. “Reading demands a two-pronged attack. It involves cracking the alphabetic code to determine the words and thinking about those words to construct meaning” (Harvey & Goudvis 2000, p. 5). The graphic on page 11 breaks down reading into two main areas: Decoding and Comprehension. Teaching decoding strategies, generally speaking, is the focus of reading instruction in the primary grades. An enormous amount of instructional time is devoted to helping students learn letters, sounds, blends, word endings, how sounds are combined to make words, how words are combined to make sentences, etc. By the time students complete the primary grades, it is the general expectation that they have learned the skills and strategies that enable them to read the words on the page. But does the ability to decode equate being a reader? I know that many of us have had students in our classes who have developed into what I refer to as “the master decoder”: students who are “reading” the words on the page, but who are not engaged with the text. What those students have missed along the way is an awareness that learning to read is not just about being able to say the words, but understanding what those words mean.



Comprehension is an equally important aspect of learning to read as decoding. Yet is there the same amount of instructional time being spent “teaching” comprehension as there is teaching decoding? For many of us, the answer is no. But if learning to read requires both the ability to say what’s on the page and to understand what those words say, then surely we need to provide our students with a balance of instruction in both. Reading Power focuses specifically on how we can teach students what comprehension is and how they can become better engaged to find meaning within the texts they read.

When my eldest son was in Grade 2, I received the call from the school in late fall: “Adrienne, we have some concerns about Spencer’s reading.” For any parent who has been on the receiving end of such a call, you will know how difficult it is. (The fact that I am a Literacy Mentor in the school district didn’t help the situation!) But it was no surprise to me that Spencer was labeled a “struggling reader,” as I had listened to him “struggle” every night on the couch. Spencer was the opposite of the “master-decoder”; he struggled with code. Daily reading in our living room was a painful experience. At times I, too, fixated on the code, feeling his frustration when he sounded out a word unsuccessfully over and over, and suppressing my desire to shout “It says ‘umbrella’! Now move on!” When I asked him to explain what he found the most difficult part of reading, he responded, “Mummy, I’m just not smooth.”

For Spencer, the invitation into the text was a welcome relief. Despite the fact that decoding was a challenge for him, the realization that he could move away from the surface of the text and into his own thinking helped him to feel successful and to recognize that reading was not just about what was on the page, but also about what was in his head. The label “struggling reader,” in my opinion, is not indicative of the Spencers of the world. He is a struggling decoder, but not a struggling thinker. Just as written output is not always a reflection of cognitive ability, the ability to decode is not always a reflection of the understanding. It is an important lesson, perhaps, for us all.

### The World of Nonfiction : A Personal History

As a child, I loved to read. I devoured *Betsy and Billy*, the Little House books, *All of a Kind Family*, *Betsy*, *Tasey and Tibb*, *Charlotte’s Web*, Enid Blyton, Roald Dahl, Astrid Lingren—books that I have heard on more than one occasion been referred to as “girly books.” I remember the library in my elementary school—quiet and inviting on the side where the fiction books lined the shelves,



“This notion of defining nonfiction too restrictively includes report writing, in particular animal reports, a favorite of thousands of teachers around the country. While it is true that these teachers are studying nonfiction, this type of report writing is only a fraction of what nonfiction texts are about.”—Tony Stead (2002)

filled baskets, and twirled around in those metal stands; sunlight streaming through the windows; the soft comfy couch and bright cushions. And when Mrs. Sterling, the teacher-librarian, did her book talk on the new books that would soon be appearing on the shelves and twirly gigs, I could hardly contain myself. Yet there was one part of the library that was not appealing to me: the Nonfiction side. In my memory, that section of the library had no windows, no cushions—just shelves and shelves of books that were too hard for me to read. Nonfiction, in my elementary-school mind, was a hard-covered book on the dark side of the library, one that described an insect, dinosaur, mammal, or ancient Egypt, with an occasional *Christmas Crafts for 3–5-Year-Olds* thrown in for good measure. Nonfiction was information found in a dark dusty book or those dreaded volumes of *Encyclopedia Britannica*. It was, as I look back on it, literally and figuratively “the dark side” of the library; certainly not a place I frequented.

My Grade 3 teacher Mrs. LaPierre announced one day that we were about to embark on an “animal research project.” She explained that we would be working in the library with Mrs. Sterling. I immediately began to feel a little uncomfortable, knowing that it would inevitably mean regular visits to “the dark side.” Mrs. LaPierre then walked up and down the rows of desks holding up a purple velvet hat. One at a time, my classmates reached into this hat and pulled out a folded piece of white paper, revealing the name of the animal they would be researching. The anticipation grew as papers were unfolded and animal names were excitedly announced: Panda, Horse, Chipmunk, Leopard. All the animals drawn by the other children were cute, furry, exciting, or a combination thereof. The animal name I drew from the purple velvet hat was neither cute and furry, nor exciting. I sat silently staring at the letters on the white slip. The boy behind me peered over my shoulder and shouted, “Armadillo. What’s that?!” Mrs. LaPierre explained that the beauty of research is that it enables you to find out about something that you knew nothing about. I did not wish to find out anything about the armadillo. Then the boy behind me whispered “Your animal’s ugly.” So I sat quietly in my desk and began to cry.

Flash ahead 20 years to my own Grade 4 classroom. Picture books and novels are displayed on shelves and window sills, posters of Newbery Award-winning books are displayed, a cozy reading corner is situated under the windows, with cushions and a couch. I even have my own metal twirly stand that I salvaged from a library reno. Fiction permeates every corner of my classroom. Nonfiction titles are scarce. They are crammed into one tub labeled *NONFICTION* that is not easily accessible. My daily read-alouds are from fiction texts: picture books or chapters from a novel. My spring author study is on an author of fiction: Kevin Henkes, Jez Alborough, Chris Van Allsburg. My daily reading activities revolve around the world of fiction.

Each year, as the end of second term approaches, I begin to feel the guilt of presenting an unbalanced program. I quickly visit my colleague and friend, Amy Wou, the teacher-librarian, and book some time for the much-anticipated unit: the Arctic Animal Research Report. Since we are studying the Inuit people, there is an obvious link to the animals of the polar region. I begin this exciting journey into the world of research similarly to Mrs. LaPierre: carefully writing the names of all the arctic animals (polar bear, Arctic fox, caribou, lemming) on little slips of white paper, folding the slips and placing them in an overturned baseball cap. With great enthusiasm, I announce to my Grade 4 class that we are about to embark on an exciting journey into the world of the researcher. Each child eagerly

and excitedly draws their animal name from the hat. The child who chooses lemming looks slightly disappointed and a little confused.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“I don’t know what a lemming is.”

“Well,” I reply in my best Mrs. LaPierre voice, “that’s the beauty of research. You will discover something new about something you knew nothing about.” Off we troop to the library. All the Arctic animal books have been pulled from the shelves and are displayed on tables. Most are too difficult for my Grade 4 students to read. I have already pulled my file on animal research and made 28 copies of the legal-sized note-taking sheet with the five research headings: Description, Food, Enemies, Habitat, and Interesting Facts. (“If you don’t know where to put something, just write it in Interesting Facts.”)

The students spend the next few weeks learning to take notes about their animal. I do remember teaching note-taking skills. I do not, however, recall teaching them anything about reading and understanding the text features, finding the main idea, connecting to background knowledge, etc. After a few weeks, all students then write their information into five paragraphs with five underlined headings: Description, Food, Enemies, Habitat, and Interesting Facts. Each student creates a poster by gluing the report onto a large piece of colored paper and including a detailed drawing of the animal, which often takes more time and effort than the report itself. The reports are read aloud to the class, and then I have the pleasure of marking 5 paragraphs times 27 children on the amazing animals of the Arctic. Then, finally, I could return, guilt-free, to my classroom and dive back into the world of fiction!

I imagine that many of you reading this may be making several “connections” to my experience. And while it may sound as though I do not believe in the notion of nonfiction report writing, that is not the case. Research reports on animals are an essential part of students’ learning; however, I now believe that there are important skills and strategies we need to teach students, *prior to* their independent study, that will enable them to have a more meaningful and thoughtful learning experience. Learning about text features, about asking questions, about making connections to background knowledge, and where to find the main idea—these are all prerequisites for any independent research.