

I Read It, but I Don't Get It

Comprehension Strategies for
Adolescent Readers

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Foreword by Ellin Oliver Keene





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Part 1

SETTING THE STAGE

1

Fake Reading

“This is reading workshop and I am Cris Tovani. You are in Room 11 and it’s now lesson four. Please check your schedules to make sure you are in the right place. If you’re not, I’ll be happy to help you find where you need to be.”

“Miss”, a kid from the back calls, “my schedule’s wrong. I’m supposed to have weight training fourth hour, not reading workshop.”

“Yeah”, another chimes in. “I signed up for pottery, not reading.”

“Well, I know”, I stammer. “Many of your schedules were changed over the summer. For some reason your elective was replaced with my class, reading workshop.”

“Are you telling me I can’t read?” accuses a girl next to the door.

“Actually, I have no idea what kind of reader you are, but someone has recommended that you take this class.” Rumblyings of discontent circulate through the room. I attempt to shift the focus. “We’ll figure out who gets to stay and who has to leave after today. For now, just hold tight and we’ll deal with schedule changes tomorrow.”

I continue taking roll.

“Jim Anderson.”

“Yeah, right here.”

“Justin Baldwin.”

“Here.”

“Theresa Black. Theresa Black? Is Theresa Black here?”

“Oh, that’s me.”

“Leigha Collins?”

“Leigha’s not coming today. She says there’s no way she’s taking another reading class. She’s dropping.”

“Great”, I mumble to myself. It’s the first day of school and kids are already dropping courses. I know if I can just get them to class, I might have a shot at helping them improve their reading comprehension.

Unfortunately, they're disappointed by their schedules, expecting one class and getting another. Their attitudes stink and I have more than a sneaking suspicion they have the wrong idea about this course. It's probably very different from remedial reading classes they've had in the past.

Ever since I could read words, I've wanted to know what else a person had to do in order to make sense of text. I didn't have a problem decoding. I had a problem understanding. I faked comprehension for years. I knew it would eventually catch up with me. But I didn't know what to do. I thought I was just born a bad reader. It was a great relief to learn there was something I could do to improve my comprehension. It's no wonder I have dedicated my life to helping readers much like myself make sense of text.

My first job as a teacher was in a posh suburban neighbourhood. I was working with twenty-four Year 2 students. Only two of them could read. I didn't know how to teach reading and I immediately started a master's degree program in reading at the University of Colorado. I was fortunate to be taught by Pat Hagerty for much of my degree program. She introduced me to the work of Frank Smith and Ken Goodman, to schema theory and to the interactive model of reading. I soon discovered that learning how to teach kids to read wasn't going to be a term-long adventure but rather a lifelong pursuit.

My second year found me in a more diverse neighbourhood. I was teaching Year 3 and 4 students. Many of them could read the words but couldn't make sense of what they were reading. About the time I finished my master's degree, I became involved with a nonprofit organisation in the United States that at the time was called the Public Education Coalition. It later merged with another organisation and became known as the Public Education and Business Coalition (PEBC).

Susan Zimmermann, cofounder of PEBC, hired me as a trainer. For the last twelve years I have had the pleasure of working with an incredible group of people. I left the classroom for three of those years, working as a staff developer. Then I decided it was time to return to the classroom and try some of the ideas I was asking teachers all over the Denver metropolitan area to try.

The work of PEBC has been quite successful with primary school-children. PEBC leaders and staff developers have written two widely acclaimed books about teaching comprehension in workshop settings – *Mosaic of Thought*, by Ellin Keene and Susan Zimmermann (Heinemann 1997) and *Strategies That Work*, by Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis (Stenhouse 2000). As part of the team that helped develop these strategies, I wanted to see whether they could work with adolescent readers

Part 2

IN SUPPORT OF STRATEGIC READING

3

Purposes for Reading: Access Tools

I read everything the same way. It doesn't matter if it is my science book or *Sports Illustrated*. What's the point? Reading is reading.

Luke, Year 10

"How many of you bought albums in the past?" I ask the class during reading workshop. Everyone in the room raises a hand. "How many of you pulled out the CD insert when you put the CD on for the first time?" Once again everyone raises a hand. "Why do you do that?"

Kellie giggles. "I want to see what the band members look like."

"I'm looking for the words to the songs", smiles Stephanie.

"I wonder if there are drawings or hidden pictures with secret meanings", confesses Chris.

I point out that each one of them has a purpose for looking through the insert. I want students to understand that good readers have purposes other than pleasure for their reading. To reinforce the point, I ask, "How many of you read the sports page?" Many boys who claim to hate reading raise their hand. "Why do you read the sports page, Tony?" I ask.

"I read it to see how other basketball teams are doing", he says.

"I read it to find out about players I like", says Josh.

Brian adds that he reads to get scores and statistics.

I ask the boys how knowing what they are looking for helps them.

"It helps me save time", says Tony.

"Right. It helps you locate information more quickly. You don't waste time reading parts you aren't interested in", I elaborate. "How else does establishing a purpose help you?"

"It helps me decide what to skip and what to read", says Butch.

"Good point", I say. "Having a purpose helps readers determine what is important."

Purpose Is Everything

A reader's purpose affects everything about reading. It determines what's important in the text, what is remembered and what comprehension strategy a reader uses to enhance meaning. When students read difficult text without a purpose, they express the following complaints:

- I don't care about the topic.
- I can't relate to the topic.
- I daydream and my mind wanders.
- I can't stay focused.
- I just say the words so I can be done.
- I get bored.

Readers behave like this when they don't have a reason for reading. They pronounce the words, finish the assignment and rarely come away with a thorough understanding. It is a waste of time; they haven't constructed meaning and can't use the information.

According to researchers Pichert and Anderson (1977), readers determine what is important based on their purpose for reading. When I ask students why they read outside of school, they usually have a reason – but they don't think it counts, because it isn't school related. When I ask students why they read in school, they say their teacher makes them: "Read chapter 10. There will be a test on Monday." Or, "Finish reading acts 1 and 2 so you can write a character analysis." Rarely do students have the opportunity to determine their own purpose for reading. It is no wonder they come to rely solely on the teacher for the reasons they read.

Unfortunately the teacher's purpose is often too vague to help. Her psychology teacher told Michelle, an excellent student, that there would be a test on the first three chapters in the textbook. When Michelle asked for more specifics, the teacher reiterated, "Just read and know the information in the first three chapters." Michelle knew she couldn't remember that much material and didn't know how to determine what was important.

Michelle isn't an exception. Most students don't know how to set their own purpose. They tend to think everything they read in a textbook is equally important. As I prepared for my first biology exam as a university student, I diligently highlighted anything and everything that seemed remotely important. After all, this was university and I was reading a university textbook. I felt I needed to memorise the text and I thought highlighting the majority of it would do the trick. My purpose was too broad. It didn't allow me to distinguish main ideas from interesting details.

"While I was doing this activity, my mind didn't wander, because I had to really think about what I was reading. The highlighting was helpful when we discussed it the following day, because I could return to the yellow areas and ask for help instead of wasting time searching for something I usually can't find."

"Highlighting helped me stay focused. Normally I just read quickly and when I'm done I don't understand what I've read. Highlighting forces me to slow down and think about my reading."

If it is used too often, this activity can become monotonous. When used sparingly, it is a concrete way to help students take responsibility for monitoring their comprehension.

Are You Listening?

Many students enrolled in university preparatory classes are good readers and know when they are confused. In a sense, they listen to the thinking taking place in their heads. Struggling readers aren't always aware of their thinking. It's one reason they don't know they are confused.

"I don't hear any voices inside my head", Jeff admits one day. "There's nothing going on up there when I read. I just say the words."

Of course, Jeff has something going on "up there". He just isn't aware of it. The class laughs when I tell them I hear voices in my head all the time. They want to know what the "little voices" tell me to do. Undaunted by their insinuations that I'm mentally unbalanced, I continue.

"Actually, I have two types of voices in my head when I read. One voice, which I call my reciting voice, sounds like me reading. It just says words. The other voice is my conversation voice and it helps me interact with what I am reading.

"When I am understanding my reading, I usually talk back to the author as if I'm having a conversation. For example, yesterday I was reading about a woman who left her three-year-old daughter behind when she escaped from Kosovo. The voice inside my head was sad and angry at the same time. I pictured my youngest daughter, Carrie and wondered how this woman could leave her child. In my head, I wondered why she didn't do something to rescue the girl. I asked, 'What happened to the three-year-old after her mother left?' The article didn't tell me. Here it is the next day and I'm still thinking about this little girl and her mother."

"You think about your reading even after you're done doing it?" asks Leigha.

"If I'm interacting with the text I do. I remember what I've read and it sticks with me. If I just read the words, I usually forget what I've read right away."

“Maybe that’s what happens to me”, says Leigha. “I never remember what I read.”

“What else does your conversation voice say?” asks Jeff.

“It tells me I am confused and sometimes it asks a question or makes a connection. Other times, it makes a prediction or draws an inference. Lots of times my conversation voice argues with the book.”

“What happens when you don’t have a conversation voice?” asks Dan.

“You mean when I pronounce the words but have no idea what I’ve read?”

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

“I call that the reciting voice. It reminds me of the voice adults have in Charlie Brown cartoons: ‘Wah Wah, Wah Wah Wahhh’. It sounds like me but doesn’t carry meaning. I can hear myself reciting the words, but I’m not interacting with the text. I hear this voice when I read complicated directions or legal documents. I pronounce the words and hear the sound of my voice but I don’t understand what I’ve read.”

What Are We Supposed to Hear?

My classes are all too familiar with the meaningless reciting voice. Every one of them has experienced reading the words without interacting with the meaning. They need to know what the interacting conversation voice is like.

One day I decide to share an example of my thinking about the book we are currently reading, *Nightjohn*, by Gary Paulsen (1993). I divide the blackboard into big boxes and turn to page 44. I read:

But sometimes he [the plantation owner] likes to take the whip, and this time he whipped her until her back was ripped and bleeding. We had to watch.

I stop reading and begin to write on the blackboard, jotting down the thinking that was taking place as I read the above passage. (It is important that I capture the thinking happening as I read, not the thinking generated as I write.) I write:

I think the plantation owner made the slaves watch another slave being beaten so it would discourage them from breaking the rules. How cruel!

“This is what I was thinking as I read. Do you notice I made an inference? I was listening to the thinking taking place inside my head and because of that I was able to respond to the book.”

I continue reading about a slave named Alice who has been severely beaten because she has wandered up to the plantation house. I stop at the

favourite magazines. Good readers slow down when something is difficult or unfamiliar. They realise that in order to construct meaning, their rate must decrease. They also know that it's okay to read faster when something is familiar or boring. Reading faster sometimes forces the brain to stay engaged. Good readers select a rate based on the difficulty of the material, their purpose in reading it and their familiarity with the topic.

Not all fix-up strategies will work all the time. Some work better than others depending on the nature of your confusion. It is important that students know that when good readers get stuck, they don't quit. They stop and decide how to repair their confusion. The more plans readers have for reconstructing comprehension, the more likely they are to stick with their reading.

Driving and Reading

My friend and colleague Laura Benson once used a metaphor comparing reading with driving a car. It hit home and I've embellished it to help students understand how important monitoring comprehension is and how useful fix-up strategies can be.

When I drive, I have a destination in mind. I am very conscious of what is going on around me. I monitor my speed. I compare it with the posted limits. I know to slow down for speed traps and I know when I can exceed the speed limit without risking danger to myself or others. When a song comes on the radio that I like, I turn it up. When a song comes on that I don't like, I change the station. I watch the petrol and oil gauges to make sure they are in acceptable ranges. I look in the mirrors so I know where other cars are around me. As long as I am heading towards my destination, I keep driving.

However, if I encounter difficulty, I stop and try to correct the problem. If I get a flat tyre or I am caught speeding I *can't* keep driving unless I want to make my situation worse. Driving on a flat can bend the rim and foul up the alignment. Ignoring the flashing red lights of a patrol car can land me in jail. There are no two ways around it. I can't keep going. I need to stop and plan what to do next.

This plan doesn't need to be elaborate, but it does have to meet the demands of the situation. My thinking needs to be flexible; I might have to try a few different strategies before I find one that works. I have to do more than sit in the car and cry. Crying won't help me get back on the road. I need to weigh my options and decide which one will help me the most.

If I want to fix the flat tyre, the obvious choice would be to change it.

Unfortunately, this won't work for me because I don't even know where the spare is, let alone the circular wrench that gets the tyre off the car. Changing the tyre isn't a plan that will help me. But I can't just sit there. I need to try something else.

I could use the mobile phone to call someone, but when I reach into the glove compartment to retrieve it, I realise this plan won't work either. Someone has used the phone and has neglected to return it. I can decide to walk to a petrol station, but I notice that it is getting dark and I am in a part of town that isn't safe; walking wouldn't be smart. Finally, I decide to raise the hood of the car, lock the doors, turn on my flashers and wait for a police officer to come to my aid. The point is, I don't give up. When one plan doesn't work, I try something else.

Monitoring comprehension and using fix-up strategies is a lot like driving. Good readers expect to arrive at meaning, just as good drivers expect to arrive at their destination. A reader's ultimate purpose is to gain meaning. In order to do this, readers must monitor their comprehension and when meaning breaks down, they need to repair it.

Repairing Confusion

Students need opportunities to select fix-up strategies based on the nature of the problem. Not every fix-up strategy works in every instance. Before students can use fix-up strategies flexibly and automatically, they need to recognise confusion and analyse what is causing the confusion. Only then can readers choose how they will try to repair meaning.

Readers who encounter an unknown word know that re-reading the word over and over again isn't going to help. They may ask someone the meaning or look the word up in the dictionary. Circumstances dictate which fix-up strategy to use. If the reader is alone, they can't ask for help. If they don't have a dictionary or are too lazy to look up the word, they have to find another way to help themselves. Perhaps they read around the unknown word and try to make a logical guess about its meaning. They may decide that the word is unimportant and consciously skip it. They may conclude that unless the word reappears, it isn't necessary to the understanding of the piece. If the word does reappear, they may decide it is important. They can flag it so they can talk to their teacher about it the next day. A reader who is aware of all of these options can attack their comprehension problem.

Another day, another class. I refer to the list of fix-up strategies on the board and begin working through several students' comprehension problems.

"Jim's problem is he doesn't know what *pariah* means. What could he do?"

What Exactly Is an Inference?

Many adults have a difficult time explaining what an inference is. Teachers know this is a complicated strategy to teach. Inferring is abstract thinking, something readers do in their head when they are reading beyond the words. Harvey and Goudvis, authors of *Strategies That Work* (2000), tell readers that “inferring is the bedrock of comprehension”.

When struggling readers are asked inferential questions, they have a tendency to return to the text, hoping to find the answer directly stated. They search in vain, not sure how much thinking they need to supply. They don't understand that authors cannot possibly furnish every detail for the reader. If they did, books would be unwieldy and readers would lose the joy of participating.

Kristi and the rest of the class aren't sure what an inference is, let alone how to make one. I want to move them away from the idea that an opinion is just as good as an inference. Before I can teach the class how to infer, I need to help them understand what an inference is.

I start off by explaining that there is a place for opinions, but opinions are very different from inferences. “Opinions can be right or wrong”, I say. “In my opinion, my brothers were the best baseball players in the state. The pro scouts that came to the practices and games thought differently, but I didn't care. My mind was set. My brothers were the best. This was my opinion and nothing was going to change it. My thinking was based on loyalty to my brothers, not logic. Inferences differ from opinions in that inferences are steeped in evidence and saturated in personal experience. Inferences are logical conclusions made with the mind, not the heart.”

Philip, still unsure about the actual meaning of an inference, wants more clarification.

“An inference”, I begin, “is a logical conclusion not directly confirmed by the author. It is based on clues from the text and personal connections made by the reader. Inferences are sometimes hard to make because the author doesn't come right out and confirm the reader's conclusions.” Feeling completely satisfied with my definition, I survey the room, only to confront forty glazed eyes, fifteen slightly agape mouths and three heads resting on desks.

Kelly speaks up, “I still don't get what an inference is.”

“Me either”, says Charity. “Why do some stories just end?”

Their questions don't have simple answers. I can't placate their frustration with a neat one-word solution.