

# The **Primary** Comprehension **Toolkit** Language and Lessons for Active Literacy

**Stephanie Harvey & Anne Goudvis**

## Teacher's Guide



***Dedication:*** *To Smokey Daniels—our editor extraordinaire, thoughtful colleague, and good friend. We're thrilled that you can channel our thinking so clearly and keep us laughing along the way.*

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Photography: David Stirling, Mason Jones, Smokey Daniels, David Johnson

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
CIP data on file with the Library of Congress

The Primary Comprehension Toolkit Teacher's Guide  
ISBN-13: 978-0-325-02154-, ISBN-10: 0-325-02154-6

The Primary Comprehension Toolkit: Language and Lessons for Active Literacy  
ISBN-13: 978-0-325-00997-1, ISBN-10: 0-325-00997-X

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper  
12 11 10 09 08 ML 1 2 3 4 5



firsthand

An imprint of Heinemann  
361 Hanover Street  
Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912  
firsthand.heinemann.com  
Office and agents throughout the world

# What is Comprehension and How Do We Teach It?

Too often in primary grades, we have defined comprehension as the ability to answer factual recall questions (“What color was the kitten?”) or to retell a story. While both of these kinds of thinking are valuable (and perhaps even foundational) they do not tell anywhere near the whole story of comprehension.

Reading comprehension is the evolution of thought that occurs as we read. True understanding happens when readers merge their thinking with the text, ask questions, draw inferences, think about what’s important, and summarize and synthesize. This enables them to use their new understanding to ask further questions and guide new learning. This active, constructive, strategic thinking process entails far more than simply retelling.

Unfortunately this well-documented view of comprehension hasn’t been universally understood or implemented. Instead, many schools still follow the tradition of breaking reading down into its component behaviors, teaching these “subskills” separately with hope that kids will later put it all together, some day.

But reading is not just behaviors, it is thinking. And reading is always about meaning. Any time we try to split off subskills of reading for very long, we cut kids off from the purpose of reading itself. In the old days, schools used to instruct kids in phonics and phonemics first, and move on to meaning and comprehension later (sometimes years later). What were we thinking? That approach sometimes had kindergarteners, first-, and even second-graders spending huge chunks of time doing isolated-skill worksheets before they were allowed to read real text.

We now understand that children need what David Perkins (2008, in press) calls “whole game” learning. In whole game learning, kids orchestrate all the same elements that “real players” (i.e. adults) use in the “game of thinking.” While it may be OK to practice free-throws in your driveway for a while, your basketball skills only come to fruition in a real game where you have to put it all together in a whole complex context. Same for reading. There’s nothing wrong with splitting out certain skills and practicing them apart from whole text experiences. But we always have to be playing the whole reading “game” where kids encounter authentic text, *and* where making meaning, not practicing subskills, is the central activity.

Today we understand that we must teach all elements of reading at once so that kids constantly practice what proficient readers do: put it all together. We don’t confine literacy learning to the reading/writing block in the daily schedule. We extend reading, thinking, and learning across the whole school day.



# Six Key Strategies

Our primary grade comprehension instruction centers on the specific kinds of thinking that proficient readers have been shown to use. We have extensively reviewed and explained this research in our book, *Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension for Understanding and Engagement* (Second Edition, Stenhouse, 2007).

No matter what their age, effective readers use the following six strategies:

## Monitor Comprehension

When readers monitor their comprehension, they keep track of their thinking as they read, listen, and view. They notice when the text makes sense and when it doesn't. They distinguish between what the text is about—the events of the narrative—and what it makes them think about. Primary grade kids are always thinking about what they hear, see, and (if they can) read. They are noticing, wondering, making connections, and making judgments all the time. When they monitor their comprehension, they use that awareness to steer their thinking as they enter texts. They expect to interact with the pictures, the features, the words, and the ideas. Rather than simply retelling the story, kids need to go beyond retelling to merge their thinking with the text. This is how they come up with the “big ideas.” So we focus on teaching kids not just to retell, but to think about the words, the pictures, the features, and the ideas that spring from the text. They stay on track when they talk, draw, and write about their thinking. By interacting with the text and with each other, they gain understanding.

## Activate and Connect

David Pearson reminds us that “Today’s new knowledge is tomorrow’s background knowledge.” The background knowledge we bring to learning colors every aspect of our understanding. Whether we are connecting, questioning, or inferring, background knowledge is the foundation of our thinking. We simply can’t understand what we hear, read, or view without thinking about what we already know. To comprehend, learners must connect the new to the known. So we consider every conceivable way to build our kids’ background knowledge to prepare them to learn new information. We begin by encouraging young learners to think about what they already know and care about, and then have them explore those topics. As kids go on to read widely in nonfiction, they are bombarded with new information. In order to understand it, if they need to merge their thinking with the information, stopping and reacting as they go. By making connections to what they already know, they make sense of their new learning, and acquire new knowledge.

## Ask Questions

Curiosity is at the heart of teaching and learning. Young kids burst through the door bubbling over with questions: “Why is the sky blue? Where does the sun go at night? What happened to the cowboys?” Questions spur curious minds to investigate. Questions open doors to understanding the world. We have to mine them with a pick axe! When young readers read nonfiction and meet new information, they

brim with questions. As we try to answer our questions, we discover new information and gain knowledge. Questions can spur further research and inquiry. Instead of demanding answers all the time, we need to teach kids to ask thoughtful and insightful questions. After all, if we hope to develop critical thinkers, we must teach our kids to think about and question what they listen to, read, and view. Asking questions enriches the learning experience and leads to deeper understanding. Questioning is the strategy that propels learners forward.

### **Infer and Visualize**

Inferring is the bedrock of understanding. It involves taking what you know, your background knowledge, and merging it with clues in the text to come up with some information that isn't explicitly stated. Inferential thinking helps readers to figure out unfamiliar words, draw conclusions, develop interpretations, make predictions, surface themes, and even create mental images.

Visualizing is sort of a first cousin to inferring. When readers visualize, they construct meaning by creating mental images, seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and even smelling! Young children seem particularly inclined to visualize in support of understanding as they listen to and read stories, often living through or living in the stories. When children infer and visualize as they listen, read, and view, they respond with joy, glee, or sometimes dread. Inferring and visualizing enable kids to get at the deeper meaning in text.

### **Determine Importance**

When we read nonfiction, we are reading to learn and remember information. Once kids know how to merge their thinking with the information, it's time to help them figure out what makes sense to remember. We can't possibly remember every fact or piece of information we read, nor should we. We teach kids to tell the difference between interesting details and salient, important information. When kids learn to paraphrase, they are well on their way to understanding the information and shaping it into their own thought. In *PTK*, kids also learn to distinguish between facts, questions, and responses so they can sort and sift information to better organize it. They use note-taking scaffolds to hold their thinking as they prepare to share it with others.

### **Summarize and Synthesize**

Synthesizing information nudges kids to see the "big picture." It pulls together their thinking, and they learn as they read and write about it. It's not enough for readers to simply recall or restate the facts. They need to use a variety of comprehension strategies including asking questions, inferring, and determining what's important to understand big ideas. We begin by simply asking young readers to stop and collect their thoughts before reading on. Eventually, children summarize and synthesize their thinking by drawing and writing in all sorts of original ways: creating poems, posters, books, and other projects that demonstrate their learning and understanding. Most importantly, synthesizing has an authentic purpose: kids share their learning with their peers and teachers, who respond with their thoughts and ideas. In this way, the classroom becomes a community of learners in which everyone is both a learner and a teacher.

# Toolkit

## Comprehension Instruction

For the K–2 *Toolkit*, we have developed twenty-two lessons around these key thinking strategies—three or four lessons for each. Every lesson is designed to introduce, reinforce, and extend one of the strategies. It begins with one of us modeling the lesson with a specific text, taking kids through all the steps of reading, writing, talking, and thinking. Then it offers a template—the Lesson Guide—that you use to design your own instruction, using any text you choose.



People sometimes wonder, “Can five-, and six-, and seven-year-olds really think like this? Can they truly infer, synthesize, and all the rest?” You bet! Notice what happens when you read a great book aloud to your kids, gathered on the rug. You realize that they are **monitoring their comprehension** when they raise their hands to **ask questions** about the text or to clarify misunderstandings about the information. You know that children are **connecting** when they blurt out comments like “I know a butterfly sucks nectar—I saw one do it!” You understand that kids are **visualizing**, because if you ask them to imagine a whale breaching, they’ll offer detailed and different descriptions. You know that they are **inferring** when they can merge their own experience with the text to respond thoughtfully to the language in a poem, or to realize that something scary is about to happen. You realize that kids are **determining importance** because they are able understand why we remember a famous person. And you know that children are **summarizing and synthesizing** because most of them can discuss why the rain forests of the world are in danger—or speculate about why the author wrote the book.

The *Primary Comprehension Toolkit* emphasizes responsive teaching. We continually watch, listen, keep track of, and document our students’ learning, stepping in with additional support as we determine it’s needed; pulling back and letting kids take the lead when they show us they know how. And we respond to our students’ needs and challenges as they reveal—through our assessment data—what’s working for them and what’s not.