

3 Ways to Emphasize Reading Comprehension

by [Jennifer Gray](#)

Reading comprehension is a key component of school assessments and remains an important life skill. These three activities, best suited for students in Grade 8 through college, encourage deep understanding of reading material and foster collaboration between students and authors. Completing this series of activities will help students become engaged with a text because they can actively participate in a conversation (real or imagined) with the author and with other readers of the text (Bean, 2014). Teachers can strengthen this unit by completing the activities with their students, illustrating that every reader must work to comprehend a text (Gallagher, 2009).

Each activity below provides teachers with a clear display of a student's understanding of texts. Students cannot complete the activities if they do not work to comprehend the reading first. They cannot just passively scan the material; they must interact with the text, their notes, their classmates, their teacher, and the author. The activities can be used individually; however, they make a strong unit when combined to create a three-part assessment in the order presented here. As a unit, the activities illustrate individual and collaborative learning with a variety of assessment options ranging from peer-to-peer, student-to-author, and student-to-teacher.

Activity One: Quadruple-Entry Journal

Ask students to read a short selection for homework (Select a living author). Have students highlight parts of the selection that seem important or interesting. During the next class, ask the students to sit in a circle. Pass out a Quadruple Entry Journal Chart, and then follow these steps.

1. In the "What the text says" column, ask students to copy out parts of the text that they highlighted. The students should use quotation marks when copying. Depending upon the time available, this could be anywhere from three to eight direct quotations. (This also emphasizes the importance of using direct quotations when copying.) Make extra copies of the handout in case students need more space for extra quotes.
2. In the "What I think" column, ask students to write their thoughts about the direct quotation they copied in "What the text says."
3. Ask students to pass their charts to the right.
4. Once the chart has been passed, each student will review what was written in the first two columns, think about those comments, and then respond with his or her own thinking in the column titled, "What my friend thinks."
5. After responding, ask students to pass the charts back to the left. Each student should have his or her own chart returned.
6. Ask students to read what the friend wrote, and then in the "What I think now" column, provide some reflective thoughts about what is on their minds now, after they have considered their classmate's opinions.

Further collaboration and assessment can occur by adding in more columns if desired, such as "What my other friend says..." or "What my teacher thinks..." For smaller classes or for students with special needs, teachers could instead enlarge the chart, place it on a wall of the classroom, and ask students to complete it as a group. This activity assists with reading

comprehension because when students are required to take notes during reading assignments, the note-taking/note-making process facilitates learning (Wilson, 2012). When students read other students' thoughts, a dynamic and engaged classroom community is created and supported: "The more students read of one another's work, the more they learn" (Sommers, 2013, p. 31). This first activity encourages individual and collaborative learning. Teachers can stop here, or they can create a unit by implementing Activity Two.

Activity Two: Author Letter

Ask students to read a short selection for homework. Have students highlight parts of the selection that seem important or interesting. (Ideally, teachers would use the same selection from the Quadruple-Entry Journal activity.)

During class, ask students to write a letter to the author of the homework reading. When composing, students should use direct quotations from the reading to help point the writer to specific areas in the reading. (Column one from the Quadruple-Entry Journal can be used here.) Suggest three parts for the author letter, after the opening greeting:

1. What the student specifically liked about the reading and why
2. What the student specifically disliked about the reading and why
3. Questions the student would like to ask the author

In addition to the letter, a YouTube video or iMovie can be created and posted online, with student letter readings and reflections. (Make this an option, not a requirement, due to varying technology comfort levels.)

This activity can also be completed in electronic blog form, using a platform such as [Tumblr](#). If access to technology is not possible, students can post their handwritten blogs on the classroom or hallway walls.

If contacting the author is possible, request to partner with him or her and send the students' responses either electronically or by mail. I have invited authors (via Skype or in person) to my classroom to respond to the letters and questions, personally. Students are often amazed to talk to the actual writer, and participation is energetic. Students receive feedback from the author, which validates and celebrates reading comprehension efforts. When students engage and write extensively about the reading, they retain more knowledge than those who do not write after reading (Wilson, 2012). Activity Two can be used on its own, or teachers can continue the unit by moving on to Activity Three.

Activity Three: Reflective Teacher Letter

Ask students to read a short selection for homework. Have students highlight parts of the selection that seem interesting. (Ideally, teachers would use the same selection from the Quadruple-Entry Journal activity.)

During class or for homework, ask students to write a letter to you, the teacher of the class. When composing the letter, students should use direct quotations from the reading to help point

the teacher to specific areas in the reading. (Column one from the Quadruple-Entry Journal can be used here.) Suggest three parts for the letter, after the opening greeting:

1. What the student found surprising in the reading
2. Why the students was surprised by that discovery
3. What the student might do with this new discovery

This letter walks students through a reflective process and yet still requires them to first comprehend the content of the reading. Students must work to discover connections between the reading and themselves. Discovering these links between a text and a reader encourages students to be life-long readers who can find value in an outside text (Gallagher, 2009).

References

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Quadruple Entry Journal Chart

NAME _____

What the text says	What I think	What my friend thinks	What I think now