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Hands-On Reading Comprehension Strategies for All Learners

by [Jill L. Haney](#)

My first teaching assignment more than 25 years ago was a seventh-grade reading position at a middle school in San Antonio, Texas, USA. Of the student population, 10% was English language learners, including newcomers. Over 80% of my students were reading significantly below grade level.

As a new teacher, I wanted to help my emerging and struggling readers improve their comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary skills but often felt out of my depth. The textbook lessons failed to reach many of them. Teaching lessons at the front of the classroom did not effect change. As I gathered instructional strategies from colleagues, professional development offerings, and books, one thing became clear: To really help my students, strategies needed to be concrete. If students could use simple manipulatives to initially learn and practice strategies, not only did they master those strategies, but they also gradually made them subconscious tasks to do when they were reading. Test scores went up. Reading levels increased. Hands-on teaching made all the difference.

Since those first years in my middle school classroom, I have had the opportunity to train teachers across the United States in hands-on reading strategies. These techniques are rooted in both research and practical experience. Some have been adapted from trainings I attended in San Antonio Independent School District. Others were inspired by practical professional books, such as [When Kids Can't Read, What Teachers Can Do](#) (Beers, 2003). All were finetuned in collaboration with my students. They taught me more than I can ever express.

Many researchers in reading have focused on the strategies that mature or successful readers use before, during, and after reading. For example, Pressley and Afflerbach (1995) list specific strategies used at each stage of reading and ways teachers can support all students to learn these strategies. For this article, I highlight a favorite strategy for each phase.

Prereading Strategy: Purposeful Skimming

Successful comprehension begins before students read a book. Activating background knowledge and setting a purpose for reading are familiar terms for reading teachers, but they are also abstract concepts to many struggling readers. Providing readers with concrete strategies that accomplish these tasks increases their confidence and sets them up for success.

One of my favorite strategies for prereading is purposeful skimming. Many developing readers receive a reading assignment in school and just turn to the first page and start reading—but this leaves them at a comprehension disadvantage. Successful readers preview their books. They prepare to read by glancing through the books and assessing what they may already know about the topic as well as what questions they have. Identifying whether it is fiction or nonfiction is also crucial as different formats require specific reading strategies.

The purposeful skimming strategy provides a concrete way for developing readers to preview books.

Step 1

Start by providing each student with three to five sticky notes. I prefer to use the 3 x 3 inch size, so there is room for writing on the notes. Provide an array of books for students to choose from, preferably at their independent reading levels. I often arrange students in small groups with a number of books in the middle. Because newcomers are often at emergent reader levels, I like to include books from collections like the [Teen Emergent Reader Libraries](#) from Saddleback Education. Look for Lexile scores from BR to 100 and readability levels from 0 to 0.9.

Step 2

Write three to five preview questions on the board. Some of my favorites at the beginning of the year are:

- Why did you choose this book?
- Who is talking?
- Where are you?
- What is going on?
- Do you still want to read this book? If so, what hooked you into reading further?

Note that I do not use academic vocabulary at the beginning of the year because I do not yet know if students know what a narrator or setting is. Thus, I simplify the questions when I first introduce this activity. As the year goes on and academic vocabulary is taught, I change the questions (e.g., Who is the main character? What is the setting?).

Step 3

Have students write each question on a sticky note. Then provide a few minutes for students to glance through their chosen books in search of the answers. When they find an answer, instruct them to place the corresponding sticky note on the page where they found it. Students should then write the answer under the question on the sticky note.

Tips

The key to this activity is to give just enough time for students to find answers but not enough time for students to actually read the books. This strategy helps students learn that the first step to reading a book is often glancing through it to get a sense of what it will be about and how best to approach it.

One of the advantages to the purposeful skimming strategy is its flexibility. You can customize the questions to the texts students will be previewing. Nonfiction questions, for example, may include *What do the subheads tell you?* or *What is the most interesting photo in the book and why?* These kinds of questions help guide students to recognizing and using common nonfiction features.

During Reading Strategy: Get the Picture

One of the strategies proficient readers use as they read is visualization. Wilson (2014) describes the act of visualizing as creating “brain movies.” Essentially, readers imagine what is happening in the text and can see it in their minds.

Visualization is not easy for many struggling readers. Today’s world surrounds people with visual images, from billboards to digital devices. Students who have been raised in the digital age are accustomed to visuals being provided. This can hamper creating their own visuals as they read.

One of the most effective strategies I have used to promote visualization is called “Get the Picture.” When I first introduce students to this strategy, I always choose a short story or hi-lo book with vivid description. Then, I read aloud to the group without showing any of the illustrations or photos that may accompany the words. This allows me to guide the whole class as they learn the strategy.

Step 1

The first step in this visualization strategy is to provide each student with an index card (preferably 5 x 8 inches) or a blank sheet of paper. Have students fold their cards or papers into three equal parts. If using index cards, students should turn them so the blank side is face-up.

Step 2

Read the selected story or article aloud, stopping at a memorable point approximately one-third of the way through. At this point, say, “Stop and get the picture.” Students then draw a picture representing what is happening in the story at the stopping point. This picture should be drawn in the first section of the card or paper. Have students label their pictures to the best of their abilities. It may be simple one-word labels or a full sentence.

Step 3

Begin reading once again, stopping again about two-thirds of the way through the story or article. Students draw what is happening at that point and label their pictures in the second section of the card or paper.

Step 4

Once again, begin reading, this time finishing the story or article. Students draw what is happening and label it in the final section of their cards or papers.

Step 5

At this point, facilitate sharing and discussion. Have students stand up with their cards or papers and then find a partner. Partners exchange their assignments, discussing what they chose to draw. This allows students to see how the same story or article can sometimes be interpreted differently.

Step 6

After sharing and discussion, students take their own cards or papers back. They then turn them over and write a summary on the back.

Tips

As students learn this technique, you can give them increasing responsibility. For example, students who know the “Get the Picture” strategy can use it during independent or paired reading, deciding for themselves the stopping points where they will draw a picture and label it. Of all the strategies I have used with students, this one has had some of the greatest success in increasing comprehension. The more students use it, the more natural it becomes to visualize while reading.

Postreading Strategy: Summarization Scaffolds

In my work with English language learners and struggling readers, I often find that summarization is one of the toughest skills for them to master. Many want to retell everything that happens, or they focus on one or two details instead of the main point of the story or article.

To help students with summarization, I find giving them a scaffold to hang their summaries on is a big help.

Fiction Scaffold

For fiction, the scaffold I use is:

- Who

- Wanted
- But
- So

Who: The main character or characters.

Wanted: The character's or characters' motivation. What is it that they want or don't want?

But: The obstacle or conflict in the story.

So: The resolution of that obstacle or conflict.

As students learn to use this scaffold for fiction summaries, also teach them to look for all four elements in the answer options on a standardized test. Any good fiction summary should have all of these elements represented.

Nonfiction Scaffold

Nonfiction requires a different scaffold because it often does not follow the story structure of fiction (biographies being a notable exception). For nonfiction, I provide the following scaffold:

- Main Topic
- 3 Significant Details
- Mostly About

Main Topic: What the article, book, or chapter is focused on (e.g., sharks).

3 Significant Details: Guide students to find three significant details by looking at bold subheads, key charts, and graphs.

Mostly About: Once the three details are identified, they can be used to figure out what the nonfiction is mostly about (e.g., the physical characteristics of sharks).

Tips

One way we used summarization scaffolds in my classroom involved keeping summarization charts. When students would read a book with chapters, they would summarize each chapter using the appropriate scaffold on a chart with a column for each part. At the end of the book, students had a ready-to-use study guide for reviewing the book and its central ideas.

Conclusion

As I have worked with developing readers, I have found that one of the keys to success for students of any age has been finding ways to make reading strategies concrete. Through the use of simple manipulatives like sticky notes and index cards, you can guide students to adopt the same strategies that research tells us successful readers use every day.

References

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Jill L. Haney is an author and national reading consultant who has presented at numerous local, state, and national conferences. Author of five evidence-based literacy programs for students with special needs and English language learners (including [Teen Emergent Reader Libraries](#), [Welcome Newcomers](#), and [PCI Reading Program](#)), Haney is an advocate for research-based teaching strategies that promote literacy for all students. Haney began her education career as a middle school reading teacher in the San Antonio Independent School District. In 1999, she was named SAISD Teacher of the Year and was awarded the Trinity Prize for Excellence in Teaching. She currently serves as director of Literacy for Saddleback Education.