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VOCABULARY AND COMPREHENSION

EFFECTIVE UPPER-ELEMENTARY
INTERVENTIONS FOR STUDENTS
WITH READING DIFFICULTIES

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CONTENTS

Introduction	vii
GOAL I: BEFORE READING: PREVIEW	15
OVERVIEW AND EXAMPLES.....	17
Lesson 1 Outline	23
Lesson 1 Case Study	25
Lesson 2 Outline	31
Lesson 2 Case Study	33
GOAL II: DURING READING: BREAKDOWN	39
OVERVIEW AND EXAMPLES.....	41
Lesson 3 Outline	53
Lesson 3 Case Study	55
Lesson 4 Outline	65
Lesson 4 Case Study	67
Lesson 5 Outline	77
Lesson 6 Outline	79
Lesson 7 Outline	81
GOAL III: DURING READING: GET THE GIST OF PARAGRAPHS	83
OVERVIEW AND EXAMPLES.....	85
Lesson 8 Outline	93
Lesson 8 Case Study	95
Lesson 9 Outline	103
Lesson 9 Case Study	105
GOAL IV: DURING READING:	
ASKING AND ANSWERING QUESTIONS.....	111
OVERVIEW AND EXAMPLES.....	113
Lesson 10 Outline	121
Lesson 10 Case Study	123
Lesson 11 Outline	131
Lesson 12 Outline	133
Lesson 13 Outline	135
Lesson 13 Case Study	137

Lesson 14 Outline	147
Lesson 15 Outline	149
Lesson 16 Outline	151
GOAL V: AFTER READING: KEY WORD REVIEW	153
OVERVIEW AND EXAMPLES.....	155
Lesson 17 Outline	163
Lesson 17 Case Study	165
Lesson 18 Outline	173
Lesson 18 Case Study	175
PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER.....	183
Lesson 19 Outline	185
Lesson 19 Case Study	187
APPENDIX A: ACADEMIC WORD LISTS	191
APPENDIX B: LESSON MATERIALS.....	213
APPENDIX C: RESOURCES AND REFERENCES.....	235

READING COMPREHENSION LESSONS

INTRODUCTION

IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION*

The reasons to read are many. We read to learn from nonfiction books and content area texts. We read for enjoyment when we immerse ourselves in novels, magazines, or even comic books. We read to glean practical information from the instructions for a board game or the directions for a math assignment. Yet all of these different types of reading require the ability to understand and remember text. That ability is reading comprehension.

It is commonly understood that students learn to read in the early grades. The need to learn from text increases as students progress through school. Learning and applying comprehension strategies is essential as students move into the upper elementary and middle school grades and encounter more sophisticated texts and concepts (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Perfetti, Landi, & Oakhill, 2005). Learning from text can be especially difficult for struggling readers, who are still learning to read yet are expected to read to learn.

It is important for struggling readers to learn the strategies that successful readers use to understand and remember what they read. Successful readers monitor their comprehension while they read. Self-monitoring and self-questioning enable readers to make connections to prior learning, signal when comprehension breaks down, and guide the use of “fix-up strategies” to repair understanding. At one time or another, even successful readers pass over paragraphs or pages of text before realizing that they do not understand or remember what they just read. Once making this realization, a good reader might make the decision to stop and attempt to summarize or to go back and reread. Most struggling readers, however, do not use these techniques. They do not monitor their comprehension, primarily because they lack the tools to identify and then repair misunderstandings when they occur. Research indicates that teaching students to use comprehension strategies before, during, and after reading can improve reading performance (Edmonds et al., in press).

**Section adapted from Boardman et al., 2008.*

TEACHING A SET OF READING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES

This guide provides a set of reading comprehension strategies that students can learn to use before, during, and after reading. Teachers often report that when students learn a routine for reading comprehension, they are better able to actively engage in reading. The set of strategies provided in this guide offer a routine for reading and understanding text, based on current research in effective reading strategies for struggling readers (e.g., National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). A synopsis of the routine is presented below.

Before reading, the teacher preteaches important vocabulary and presents the “big ideas” of the passage in **Goal I: Preview**. Previewing is an opportunity to build prior knowledge, to focus students on the key ideas of the lesson, and to begin explicitly teaching important vocabulary. Students also preview the passage, making connections to prior knowledge and predicting what they will learn, based on information provided by the teacher and a quick look at the titles, subtitles, and pictures in the text.

During reading, students stop after each paragraph or short section of text (stopping points set by the teacher) to identify and repair misunderstandings in **Goal II: Breakdown** and to determine the main idea in **Goal III: Get the Gist**. Stopping after each paragraph takes longer but supports students in 1) learning to use the strategies and 2) gaining a thorough understanding of what they read. As students gain proficiency at using the strategies, teachers increase the length of sections that students read before stopping.

After reading, students generate and answer questions about what they read in **Goal IV: Asking and Answering Questions**. Students identify key words and provide evidence for their importance by summarizing the most important ideas from the text in **Goal V: Key Word Review**.

A model of the reading comprehension strategies explained in this guide is presented on the following page. Detailed information about each strategy is presented in the Lesson Overview and Examples section.

READING COMPREHENSION GOALS I–V

Before Reading**GOAL I: PREVIEW**

- Students are introduced to key ideas and vocabulary.
- Students connect prior knowledge to information in the text.
- Students predict what they will learn.

During Reading**GOAL II: BREAKDOWN**

- Students identify words or ideas they do not understand.
- Students apply “breakdown strategies” to identify unknown words.
- Students “get the gist” of difficult sentences.

GOAL III: GET THE GIST OF PARAGRAPHS

- Students find the main idea (gist) of short sections of text.

After Reading**GOAL IV: ASKING AND ANSWERING QUESTIONS**

- Students generate a variety of questions about the entire text.

GOAL V: KEY WORD REVIEW

- Students summarize the most important ideas from the text, using key words.

In this model, students are introduced to the strategies through scaffolded instruction. Teachers first explicitly teach and model a strategy. Teaching focuses on answering the following questions for students:

- What is the strategy?
- When is the strategy used?
- Why is the strategy important?
- How is the strategy performed?

When students become familiar with a strategy, teachers move to the teacher-supported phase, or guided practice. Independent practice begins when students gain proficiency with the strategy. The goal is for students to become proficient at each strategy, so they are able to integrate the strategies into their individual reading practice.

It takes time for students to master reading comprehension strategies. If students are not able to perform a strategy on their own with minimal support, teachers provide more modeling and practice opportunities. For example, some students may require additional opportunities to watch the teacher model the gist strategy before they are ready to move on to guided practice. The teacher may choose to model how to get the gist with two or more paragraphs before moving into the teacher-supported phase, thinking aloud, modeling how to write the gist on the learning log, and so on. When students know what the gist is, and why, how, and when to use the gist, the teacher may offer multiple opportunities to practice. The teacher may read a paragraph with the group and generate a group gist, provide multiple examples and nonexamples and have students discuss what makes a good gist, and have students write a gist in pairs. Throughout the teacher-supported phase, the teacher closely monitors students' understanding.

The Lesson Outlines section of this guide provides suggestions for introducing the strategies in stages and putting the strategies together over time.

SELECTING READING MATERIALS

The set of reading strategies presented here is designed to be used with expository text, or text that provides information and teaches content. Examples include content area textbooks, biographies, newspaper or magazine articles, and online resources. Although learning from narrative text, such as short stories and novels, is important, other strategies are more suited

to its unique features, such as setting, characters, and plot. Although some teachers adapt the strategies presented in this guide to fit narrative text, we suggest focusing on expository text.

We suggest that teachers begin using these strategies with expository text of high interest to students, such as *Weekly Reader*, *Time for Kids*, or *National Geographic Kids*, which are commonly available as school subscriptions or online. Teachers can look for publications with brief articles that capture students' attention with interesting information and a friendly layout and that can be read in a short amount of time. When students become familiar with the strategies, teachers can move into content that supports what students are learning in school—using social studies or science textbooks or articles and books related to what students are studying.

Teachers should select text that is not too difficult for students but not too easy (students should be able to read about 9 of every 10 words correctly). If the text is too easy, it will not engage students, and they will not need to use strategies to understand and remember what they read. If the text is too difficult, students will focus too much of their attention on decoding the words, leading to frustration and difficulty applying the strategies.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

Goals I–V

Each comprehension goal includes the following features:

- Overview and examples
- Lesson outlines
- Case studies

Overview and Examples. Each reading comprehension goal is described in detail, with numerous descriptive classroom examples. The overview and examples also provide useful information about how to scaffold instruction, beginning with teacher modeling and moving into guided and independent practice.

Lesson Outlines. The outlines provide suggestions for sequencing lessons. When reading the outlines, if a teacher is unclear about how to teach a reading strategy, he or she should go back to the overview and examples for that goal for more information.

Although the lesson outlines provide a guide for introducing the strategies, teachers should not feel that they must follow the outlines exactly. After the directions to teach the lesson, each lesson outline contains a Next Steps section that provides suggestions for transitioning into subsequent lessons. Deciding what to teach next depends on the strategy, students' understanding and application of it, and the teacher's instructional style.

Case Studies. Case studies follow many of the lesson outlines. The case studies illustrate the classroom application of the lessons, including sample dialogue between teachers and students. Case studies provide examples of what strategy instruction looks like—they do not include the full instruction for each strategy. Multiple teachers who have taught each of these lessons wrote the case studies and included actual student responses.

Appendices

Appendix A: Academic Word Lists. These lists consist of key academic words found in state-adopted content area textbooks for fourth and fifth grades. The lists are organized by content area (e.g., mathematics, social studies, science) within each grade.

Appendix B: Lesson Materials. This book includes many materials, including student learning logs and cue cards. Most of the materials appear first in the overview and examples, lesson outlines, or case studies, and then again as blackline masters in Appendix B.

Appendix C: Resources and References. This section provides useful tools for educators, including recommended books on educational research and instructional strategies, recommended websites, a glossary of terms used in this and other educational publications, and a reference list.

