

CHAPTER 3

Creating, Organizing, and Managing Comprehension Centers

Comprehension centers provide purposeful, authentic settings for students to independently apply their comprehension strategies. Students may work in small groups, with partners, or on their own in this setting. Comprehension centers promote the integration of reading, writing, and discussion and provide a variety of ways for students to integrate and practice their comprehension strategies.

Student-facilitated comprehension centers are described in detail in this chapter. It begins by explaining the nature of the primary-level centers and delineating their purposes. Next, issues related to organization and management, including scheduling and student accountability, are explored. Finally, descriptions of a variety of comprehension-based centers and sample activities are presented.

Creating Guided Comprehension Centers

The time students spend in comprehension centers should be meaningful. This means that we need to be aware of students' abilities to work independently, create engaging activities, and provide accessible text. It is important to take time to teach students about the purpose of each center and how it functions. The five steps of explicit instruction—explain, demonstrate, guide, practice, and reflect—facilitate this process.

Center activities should accommodate a variety of learning levels, be open-ended, and be able to be completed independently—in small groups, in pairs, or individually. The activities should be purposeful, address a variety of interests and intelligences, and help students to think critically and creatively. The activities also should be engaging, foster discussion, extend learning, and promote decision making and student ownership of learning.

The centers are usually located around the perimeter of the classroom and away from the area used for teacher-guided small-group instruction (Guided Reading). The centers vary in appearance from tabletop tri-fold displays to file folders, pizza boxes, and gift bags. It is important to remember that the content of the center is more important than its physical appearance.

A variety of centers can be used when implementing the Guided Comprehension Model. Some centers may be specific to reading skills such as the ABC center; others, such as the mystery center,

represent a theme-related genre; still others, such as the listening center and the writing center, are process based. Centers may be permanent throughout the year, but the topics addressed may change with themes. For example, in the poetry center, the resources could change from poems about families to poems about seasons, depending on the current theme.

During center time, students can work independently or in small groups to make words, apply strategies while reading theme-related texts, write stories or poems, complete projects, or engage in other theme-related activities. The teacher should provide a structure for these projects but make sure that the activity is open-ended to allow for students to apply thinking and personal interpretations.

Although there are many activities that can be completed in literacy centers, in Guided Comprehension, center activities are designed to promote students' development and application of comprehension skills and strategies. (A graphic organizer to facilitate planning literacy centers can be found in Appendix D, page 300. Suggested centers, accompanying open-ended projects, and other extensions for learning are described in this chapter; additional center activities are embedded in the theme lessons in Part Two.)

ABC Center

Students participate in a wide variety of language activities ranging from word sorts to creating alphabet books of varying levels of complexity.

A-B-C Watch Me Read! (Page, 2001): Students fold a piece of paper into eight sections. At the top of each section, they write one of their favorite lowercase letters. Next, they look around the room and in familiar literature to find words they can read that begin with each of the chosen letters. Then they copy the words onto their charts.

Alphabet Books—Individual: When students know 10 letters, they begin making their own alphabet books. They continue adding to the books as they learn the remaining letters.

Students continue making alphabet books through the elementary grades. These books are often theme based. Titles of student books might include *My Favorite Author Alphabet Book*, *My ABC Book of Friends*, or *My Community Alphabet Book*. (See Appendix D, page 297, for a list of published alphabet books that serve as great models for this activity.)

Class Alphabet Book: Students can create individual pages to contribute to a class alphabet book. The class alphabet books might be based on a theme, favorite author, or favorite genre.

Sentence Strips: Sentence strips from a variety of stories are kept at this center. Students can use these for numerous activities including practicing sequencing; reviewing the beginning, middle, and end structure of stories; and reading and retelling the story.

Sorts: A variety of sorts can be kept at this center. Students may use these cards or manipulatives to create sound, word, or concept sorts. (For more information about sorts, see Appendix B.)

Art Center

Students use materials at the art center to visually represent their understandings of texts or to create illustrations for the texts they are writing. A variety of materials and examples of specific art techniques should be available at the center. The following materials are suggested:

- All kinds of paper—colored, lined, construction, large, textured, adhesive notes
- All kinds of writing and illustrating utensils—markers, crayons, paints, colored pencils, pencils, water colors, texture paints
- Scraps of fabric, scraps of wallpaper, contact paper, cotton balls, and macaroni (and other items to provide texture for illustrations)
- Glue sticks, white glue, tape
- Scissors—straight and patterned—and hole punchers
- Stamps—alphabet, textures, symbols, designs
- Printmaking supplies
- Wire, yarn, sticks with rounded edges, ribbon, rubber bands
- Magazines, catalogs

The center should include samples and directions for a variety of art techniques, such as drawing, collage, painting, printmaking, and puppetry.

Drama Center

In this center, students use acting to demonstrate their understandings. They can plan and rehearse their acting performances. The following are some ideas for implementing drama in the classroom.

Puppet Theater: Students use puppets provided at this center to engage in storytelling and retelling. Puppets may be created from paper bags, wooden spoons, or other materials.

Readers Theatre: Students use minimal theatre to dramatize stories. They first transcribe a story or other text into a play format, and then they rehearse the dramatization using voice, facial expressions, and movement to portray characterizations. They use scripts during the performance.

Genre Center

The focus of the genre center changes as the year progresses. Possible topics include biography, traditional and transformational fairy tales, fantasy, folk tales, mystery, and poetry. (For examples of genre centers, see the descriptions of mystery center and poetry center in this section.)

Making Words Center

Students use a variety of activities to construct words. (For related blackline masters, see Appendix D, pages 316–317.)

Making Words (Cunningham, 2008): Students manipulate the letters of a mystery word to create other words. They begin with short words and progress to longer ones. They may create the words based on clues or just list as many words as possible. Then they guess the mystery word. When creating the words, students may manipulate plastic letters, arrange magnetic letters on a cookie sheet, or use letter tiles.

Making and Writing Words (Rasinski, 1999a): In this adaptation of *Making Words*, students write the words they create from the letters in a mystery word. *Making and Writing Words* provides students with opportunities to practice their handwriting and spelling.

Making and Writing Words Using Letter Patterns (Rasinski, 1999b): In this adaptation of *Making and Writing Words*, students use rimes (word families) and other patterns as well as individual letters to create words. Then students transfer their knowledge to create new words. Finally, they cut up the organizer to create word cards, which they use to practice the words in games and sorts.

For example, in a unit on mysteries, students might read *Cam Jansen and the Mystery Writer* (Adler, 2007), and *theater* (p. 52) might be the mystery word. The letters in the word would be shared in random order. Then the students would be asked to make and write as many words as they can using the letters in that word (only once unless a letter was repeated in the mystery word). Following are some of the words they might create.

- Two-letter words: *at, he*
- Three-letter words: *tea, tee, tar, eat, ate, art, rat*
- Four-letter words: *rate, heat, tear, hare*
- Five-letter words: *threat*
- Six-letter words: *heater*
- Mystery word: *theater*

Mystery Center

Students read mysteries and use the elements of the genre to create mysteries in a variety of formats. Mysteries students write can be placed in the classroom library or students can share them with the class in Author's Chair.

Create-a-Mystery: Label bags or boxes with the major components of a mystery (such as suspects, clues, victims, detectives, criminals, motives, crimes, and crime scenes). Teachers record on index cards examples of each from mysteries they have read, and then they place the index cards in the appropriate bag or box. Students select one index card from each box and use that information to create a mystery. After writing the mystery, students can illustrate it and share it with the class. The students can then extend this activity by participating in a Mystery Theater.

Suspicious Suspects: The students organize their thoughts about the suspects in a mystery by completing the Mystery Suspect Organizer (see Appendix D, page 320). Based on the clues, the students can easily come to a conclusion about who committed the crime. The organizer also can be completed as a planner for writing a mystery.

Write Your Own Mystery: The students will use the Write Your Own Mystery graphic organizer to record information to help them plan mysteries they will write (see Appendix D, page 336). The organizer also can be used to help students summarize a mystery they are reading. On the organizer they draw, describe, or explain the crime scene. They write two clues and describe a main character, and they also write a brief description of how the mystery is solved. As an alternative writing activity, students can create mysteries based on photos or story starters placed at the center. Following is a mystery written by a second-grade student:

The Case of the Missing Grapes
by Cody Baker

Red grapes are my favorite. They were in the fruit bowl when my family went to a football game. It was a great game. We had lots of fun and our team won. After the game, we went back to my house and my mom said that my brother and I could have some fruit before dinner. I ran to the fruit bowl to get my grapes, but when I got there, the grapes were missing. I asked my brother if he had taken them, but he's my younger brother and he hadn't even reached the fruit bowl yet. Then I asked my dad if he ate them and he said he saw them on top of the fruit bowl when we left, but he didn't eat them. Next, I asked my mom and she said they had to be in the bowl, because that is where she put them. So, she checked the bowl, and they really were gone. My mom said this is quite a mystery.

I wondered what happened to the grapes. I looked in the refrigerator and in the cupboards, but I couldn't find them anywhere. Then I went to my room to play with my Wii and the mystery was solved! I started seeing grapes on the floor one by one and when I went in my room, our cat was sitting in the middle of the floor eating the grapes. I told my family and we all laughed.

Mystery Poetry: Students write poems about various aspects of mysteries using formats such as acrostics, cinquains, definition poems, or diamantes (see Appendix D, pages 323–327, for poetry forms). For example, students may write an acrostic about one of the suspects in a mystery by writing the name and using the letters in the suspect's name as starters for the clues related to this suspect. Students can contribute their poems to a class book of mystery poems or use their poems for a Poetry Theater presentation.

Mystery Pyramid: Students can manipulate language by trying to fit all the elements of a mystery into a Mystery Pyramid (see Appendix D, page 319). Students enjoy completing this activity with a partner or in trios.

Mystery Theater: The students practice a scene from a mystery they have read, and then perform it for the class. The audience tries to guess which mystery the scene is from and the characters involved.

Word Detective: Using the Word Detective Sequential Roundtable Organizer, the students can create a master list or word wall of mystery words from mysteries read (see Appendix D, page 335). The completed list can then be used to support students' writing or mystery theme word sorts.

Listening Center

Students can independently apply their comprehension strategies as they listen to a variety of theme-related audio books at this center.

Making Books Center

Students can retell key events from stories, gather data and create reports on content area topics, or write creative pieces that can be published. These may be self-created or follow a familiar structure, such as alphabet books. The following is a list of book types and suggestions for using them:

- *Accordion:* retelling, content area facts, creative stories with illustrations
- *Origami:* word books, retelling, facts, short stories, story elements

- *Flip/flap*: word work (parts of speech, antonyms, synonyms, rhymes, prefixes/suffixes, story elements, riddles)
- *Slotted*: journals, reading response, word books, alphabet books
- *Dos à dos*: dialogue or buddy journal, research and report, compare/contrast
- *Stair-step*: riddle books, sequence story events, time lines

(See Appendix D, pages 307–309, for directions for making books.)

Pattern Book Center

Students use a pattern from a familiar book and retell the story or share information using the pattern. Some effective patterns are those used in *Fortunately* by Remy Charlip (1993) and *The Important Book* by Margaret Wise Brown (1990). Providing specific organizers for pattern books helps students plan these books (see Appendix D, pages 321–322).

Poetry Center

Keep a large supply of poetry books and poetry cards at this center. Provide lots of copies of poems that students can read, act out, or illustrate. The following are activities students will enjoy completing at the Poetry Center.

Poetry Forms: Students create their own poems using structured formats such as bio-poems, cinquains, and diamantes. Blacklines of poem formats (see Appendix D, pages 323–327) for students to use and examples of completed poems are available at this center.

Poetry Frames: Students create their own versions of published poems. The teacher can create frames in which students can write their own words, keeping the structure but changing the content of the original poem. (See Appendix D, page 312, for a poetry frame for “If I Were in Charge of the World.”)

Poem Impressions: Students write poems based on a series of clues provided from an existing story poem, and then they share their poems. Finally, the original poem is read and discussion focuses on comparing and contrasting the impressions with the original poem.

Poetry Theater: In small groups, students plan and practice acting out a poem. These dramatizations include minimal theatrics and props and maximum expression through voice and actions.

Poetry Turnabouts: Students can work with partners to change a story poem into a written story or picture book. For example, students might read “Sick,” a story poem by Shel Silverstein in which little Peggy Ann McKay pretends to be sick so she can stay home from school. Then at the end of the poem, she learns that it is Saturday and she suddenly is feeling just fine and is going out to play. The following is a student example of a Poetry Turnabout for “Sick”:

Little Peggy Ann McKay thought she could stay home from school if she pretended to be sick. So she said she had a long list of reasons to be sick like measles, mumps, and purple bumps. Then someone said it was Saturday and she knew there was no school, so she stopped pretending to be sick and went out to play.

Project Center

Students work on specific extensions or projects related to the theme or current events. These may include multiple modes of response such as reading, writing, illustrating, and dramatizing. Various reference materials, from encyclopedias to books to the Internet, should be readily available.

Book Cubes: Students use the Summary Cube (see Appendix C, pages 249–250 and 291) to present essential information about a book. For example, students can record the title, author, main character(s), setting, summary statement, and illustration.

Bookmarks: Students create bookmarks about the book they read. They may choose what to include on the bookmark or the teacher can provide guidelines. For example, information for narrative texts may include title, author, main character(s), the student's thoughts about the book, and illustrations of characters or events. For informational texts, students can include the title, author, key ideas learned, their reactions, and illustrations.

Book Mobile: Students create mobiles about books they have read. Students may create the mobile on their own or use the Book Mobile Organizer (see Appendix D, page 298) to format the information. Information may include the title, author, setting, characters, problem, resolution, and illustration. Students may also use the mobile format to share information about the author, focus on a single narrative element (e.g., character mobiles), or review a book. Because the mobiles will be suspended from the ceiling, students can record information on both sides of the paper.

Newspaper/Newsletter: Students write newspaper articles related to a topic of study and publish them in a newspaper format. Examples include articles about pollution during an oceans theme, reviews of a new book or book-based movie such as *Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs*, and collections of comic strip summaries presented as the comics section of the newspaper.

Press Conference (McLaughlin, 2010): This inquiry-based activity promotes oral communication. Students choose a topic to investigate. Then they peruse newspapers, magazines, or the Internet to find at least two sources of information about the topic. After reading the articles, focusing on essential points, raising questions, and reflecting on personal insights, the student presents an informal summary of his or her research to a group of classmates or the entire class. Members of the audience then raise questions that can lead to "I Wonder" Statements that students can record in their investigative journals (see the Press Conference Summary blackline in Appendix D, page 328). Students can use Questions Into Paragraphs (QulP) to organize the information for their Press Conference (see Appendix C, pages 245–246).

Open-Mind Portraits (Tompkins, 2006): Students draw two or more portraits of one of the characters in a story. One drawing is a regular face of the character; the other drawings include one or more representations of the mind of the character at important points in the story. The mind pages include words and drawings representing the character's thoughts and feelings.

Questions Into Paragraphs (QulP) (E.M. McLaughlin, 1987): Students ask questions related to the topic and use two or more sources to find answers to each question. The information is recorded on a QulP Research Grid (see Appendix C, pages 245–246 and 284) and then used to write a summary paragraph or to organize research for a Press Conference.

ReWrite (Bean, 2000): In this activity, students write songs before and after content area study. For example, students write a song based on what they think they know about bats. Then they read to learn about bats and rewrite their lyrics based on the new information. The rewrite represents

how students' knowledge, perceptions, and feelings have changed after studying the topic. Tunes may include familiar songs or instrumental tapes.

Choose Your Own Project: Students make selections from a list of ideas to extend their thinking about what they have read (see Appendix D, page 304).

Storytelling Center

Students can engage in storytelling, in which they focus on the narrative elements (characters, setting, problem, attempts to resolve the problem, and resolution) with a partner or small group. It is a good idea to provide a tape recorder at this center, so students can listen to themselves tell stories.

Wordless Picture Books: Students tell the story of wordless picture books, such as Alexandra Day's *Carl Goes to Daycare* (1995) and *Carl's Masquerade* (1992), or David Wiesner's *Tuesday* (1991), *Sector 7* (1999), *The Three Pigs* (2001), and *Flotsam* (2006). Students may work in pairs or tape record their storytelling.

Storytelling Gloves: Students use Storytelling Gloves with Velcro-backed characters and other representations of the narrative elements to sing familiar songs and share rhymes and tales. Commercially available Storytelling Gloves include "Old MacDonald Had a Farm," "The Three Little Pigs," "Five Green and Speckled Frogs," "Five Little Ducks," "The Three Bears," "The Itsy Bitsy Spider," "Baa Baa Black Sheep," and "The Gingerbread Man." (Storytelling Gloves and Lapboards are available from Lakeshore at www.lakeshorelearning.com.)

Teaching Center

In this center, students work with partners and take turns being the teacher. A variety of activities can be used in this center.

Transparency Talk (Page, 2001): In this center, a student assumes the role of the teacher. He or she places transparencies containing onsets and rimes, sentences, messages, or stories the classroom teacher has prepared on the overhead projector. The "teacher" then uses these for a variety of activities including finding and lifting words he or she can read, finding all the words that begin or end with a particular sound or pattern, or reading along with a partner. (Place the projector on the floor and use a white piece of paper for a screen.)

Read the Room: The "teacher" uses a pointer and the "student" and "teacher" take turns reading room labels, the word wall, bulletin board, or morning message as the "teacher" points to it. Then the partners switch roles.

Shared Reading: The "teacher" uses a pointer as he or she and the "student" read a Big Book together.

Theme Center

Books at a variety of levels related to the theme of study are housed in this center. Students may self-select a book to read and use it to practice and transfer comprehension strategies. Students may also select the mode of reading they will use. This often includes using the following patterns from Patterned Partner Reading:

- *Predict–Read–Discuss*: Partners make predictions about material, read to confirm or disconfirm their predictions, discuss the outcome, and then renew the cycle.
- *Read–Pause–Make a Connection*: Partners take turns making connections to the text they are reading.
- *Read–Pause–Retell*: Partners read, stop to think, and retell what they have read to that point.
- *You Choose*: Partners select which mode to use.

(To learn more about Patterned Partner Reading, see Appendix C, pages 239–240.)

Vocabulary Center

This center may have a word wall or other display of words that can be the focus of study. These words may be structurally similar (rhymes, prefix, suffix, roots) or may be theme-related. Sentences also may be displayed, so students can use context clues to “Guess the Covered Word” (Cunningham, 2008).

This center also may include interesting word books (such as *The Weighty Word Book* by Paul Levitt [1990], *Animalia* by Graeme Base [1996], or books by Fred Gwynne, Ruth Heller, or Marvin Terban) that can provide the impetus for word study. Students work on learning, using, and making connections to these new vocabulary words. The following are activities students can complete at the vocabulary center.

Acrostics: Students write the name of a topic or character vertically, and then write words or phrases to describe the topic, each description starting with one of the letters in the name. The focus can include characters, places, people, or any other topic related to areas of study. Students can also use the acrostic form to retell key events of a story in sequential order.

Invent a Word: Students use their knowledge of prefixes, suffixes, and roots to create new words and their meanings. Then students illustrate the new word’s meaning.

Word Bingo: Students put 16 vocabulary words on a Bingo sheet. Clues such as definitions, synonyms, antonyms, or rhymes are listed on cards and placed in a bag or box. One at a time, a student pulls out a card and reads the clue, and students cover the word with a marker. The first student to get four in a row wins.

Word Sorts: Students sort vocabulary words into categories provided by the teacher (closed sort) or by self-selected categories (open sort). These might include rhyming words, parts of speech, vowel sound, syllables, and specific theme subtopics. This may be completed in a hands-on fashion, using word cards; then students can record their ideas on a word-sort sheet. This activity also may be completed in writing on a web or other organized structure.

Word Storm: A visual display—such as a picture from a book, a piece of art, or a poster—provides the impetus for word brainstorming. Students look at the visual and brainstorm and record words that come to mind. Then they use some or all of the words to create a detailed sentence or paragraph about the visual.

Writing Center

This center is a place for free and structured writing. Students may write informally or use the writing process. You may also structure the writing using one or more of the following ideas.

Informational Writing: Students write restaurant menus and checks; create brochures about theme-related topics; write newspaper articles; write letters; and develop book, movie, and music reviews.

Journals: Students write about self-selected topics or respond to teacher-provided prompts.

Patterned Writing: Students use patterned books, poetry forms, fractured fairy tales, and nursery rhymes as formats for writing.

Sticker or Stamp Stories: Students use stickers or stamps to create an illustration with action and then write a story to accompany the picture.

Story Bag: Students pull out one item at a time from a bag of story-related props the teacher has prepared. They create a story based on the props as they remove them from the bag.

Story Collages: Instead of writing a story and then illustrating it, students create textured illustrations first and then develop stories based on them. Because the illustrations are textured (pine cones, aluminum foil, felt, sand), students can use their tactile modalities (Brown, 1993).

Story Impressions: Students write a story based on approximately 10 clues from a story. Each clue is from three to five words, and the clues are placed sequentially and connected with downward arrows. The title of the original story may or may not be shared. When the story is completed and the students read it, the original author's story is read for comparison and contrast (see Appendix C, pages 217–218).

Story Trifold: Students write a story using a graphic that folds into three labeled parts: beginning, middle, and end (see Appendix D, page 334).

Organizing and Managing Comprehension Centers

Students can move from center to center in a variety of ways, depending on the structure of the literacy schedule and the students' level of independence. The following methods are used frequently.

Menu Board: One way to organize center time is to use a menu board that provides a visual organizational overview of Stage Two (see Figure 3 on page 24). The students who will meet for teacher-guided small-group instruction are listed on the menu board. Center choices are also provided and students put their names under the center name where they will work. The number of students who may work at a given center or at a given activity within a center is designated at that center and on the menu board. For example, three is the designated number of students for the making words center as posted at the activity site and on the menu board. Students continue working at their assigned center until they complete the work they have scheduled for that day. For example, students may choose to work on word study at the ABC center or use a partner-reading pattern to read a book at the theme center. This assures that choice is being accommodated on multiple levels: Students can choose what goals they are trying to achieve that day, which centers to visit, how long to stay, and how to manage their time.

Required and Optional Centers: We can also provide students with a framework for required and optional centers (see Appendix D, page 333). Sometimes we may choose to assign students to

the centers where they will begin, but they may choose to move later, as openings at other centers occur.

Rotating Schedule: Some teachers prefer to move the students using a rotating schedule. With this setup, students move among three or four activities, changing every 15 to 20 minutes. This rotational format provides maximum control by the teacher, but limits students' opportunities for choice and for learning to manage their own time.

Student Accountability

Students need to be accountable for the time they spend at the centers. Using a record-keeping system helps to keep track of which centers each student visits during the week. We can use a whole-group chart to monitor who visits which centers each week, or we can place charts at individual centers for students to record their visits. Students may also keep track of their work in their Guided Comprehension Journals (see cover sheet in Appendix D, page 311).

Student self-assessment can also contribute to our understanding of how students used their center time. Providing self-assessment forms that indicate which centers students visited, what they did, and how they think they progressed toward their goal on a particular day facilitates this process (see Appendix D, page 303).

Students can keep their center work and reflections in a two-pocket folder, where the teacher can review them weekly or biweekly. Students also can share their work with the teacher in individual conferences. Including a checklist, rubric, or other evaluative tool at each center facilitates this process (see Appendix D). At the end of Stage Three, selected works will be transferred to the students' Guided Comprehension Profiles.

Regardless of what the comprehension centers include or how they are managed, they are places for independent exploration by students. The centers should accommodate a variety of abilities, be open-ended, have clear directions, be motivational, and provide activities that are familiar to students so they can use them independently.

Ford and Opitz (2002) suggest the following guidelines for using centers to facilitate this process:

- Operate with minimal transition time and management concerns.
- Encourage equitable use of centers and activities among learners.
- Include a simple built-in accountability system.
- Allow for efficient use of teacher preparation time.
- Build the centers around classroom routines.

In the next chapter, another setting in which students independently apply reading skills and strategies, student-facilitated comprehension routines, is described in detail. The comprehension routines discussed include adapted versions of Literature Circles, Reciprocal Teaching, and Cross-Age Reading Experiences.