

Introduction

This second edition of *Comprehension Strategies for Middle Grade Learners: A Handbook for Content Area Teachers* includes 21 new strategies to assist middle grade learners in the content areas. These strategies were added to expand the usefulness of the text and incorporate strategies that have been developed since the first edition. All of the original strategies have been retained for their continued usefulness. The combination of original and new strategies will allow readers to have a broader variety of strategies from which to select. Because of overwhelming responses from readers who appreciated the simplified and easy-to-read layout of the original edition, the format of the second edition has not been altered substantially. A reflection section has been added to each strategy, which provides questions for readers to consider what did and did not work and how the strategy can be improved in the future. An appendix has been added that addresses the use of technology with comprehension strategies, as its uses and implications have increased in the past decade.

As educators, we strive to prepare students to become successful, contributing members of society. Reading is a vital part of this preparedness. It is more than matching sounds with letters or learning sight words. Reading involves comprehension—understanding what is read, what is meant, what is implied. When students have comprehension difficulties, the task of text instruction becomes increasingly complicated for educators. How can students learn from text if they cannot understand their assigned readings? This issue can be approached from different perspectives depending on the grade level of the students.

For teachers of middle school students, there are two issues to consider. First, many of the texts students encounter in middle school are informational, which differ in organization and structure from the fiction and poetry students encounter in the elementary grades. It is important to identify these differences and determine how best to help students in comprehending a variety of texts (Blachowicz & Ogle, 2001). The focus on reading a variety of texts for a variety of purposes is also evident in the Common Core State Standards (2010), which have been adopted by the majority of states in the United States. The purpose of this initiative is to ensure that parents, students, and teachers know what learning is expected of students to achieve college and career readiness. The reading standards encourage students to read a variety of classic and contemporary literature as well as a variety of informational texts.

Second, by the time students have reached middle school, they are expected to read and comprehend grade-level texts. Many middle school teachers are uncertain how to approach instructing students who have difficulties with text comprehension. They may assume that this is the job of the reading teacher, or they may feel they do not have the skills to teach reading. However, according to Radcliffe, Caverly, Hand, and Franke (2008), every teacher should have the necessary knowledge and skills to integrate reading throughout the content areas. Comprehension must be *taught* [my emphasis]. It is the essence of reading and cannot be left to chance (Opitz & Eldridge, 2004). In reality, we are all reading teachers. If students have a problem reading or comprehending the text we have assigned, it is our job to assist them. Once we have an understanding of this, it is important to have the necessary tools to teach both reading and content (Massey & Heafner, 2004). Strategies, such as the ones provided in this book, are designed to assist both the teacher with instructing and the student with comprehending and learning. The strategies are useful with a diverse range of students, including English learners.

In addition to assisting students with strategies for comprehension, we must also provide them with the skills to use these strategies independently as they encounter even more complex texts in high school and postsecondary education. We are constantly building background knowledge, and reading to learn is a lifelong process (Marcell, DeCleene, & Juettner, 2010). Researchers and literacy specialists agree that learning to read does not end in the elementary schools. As students move into middle and high schools, reading becomes more complex; therefore, teachers at these levels need strategies to help students comprehend more sophisticated texts (Tovani, 2004). The Common Core State Standards reinforce the importance of text complexity, giving equal weight to the sophistication of what students read and the skill with which they read. The reading standards specifically offer a staircase of increasing text complexity, thereby ensuring preparation for college- and career-level reading. Reading comprehension is a process that takes place over time and is about finding meaning in text. It is our responsibility to ensure that students are provided with the necessary instruction to comprehend and analyze what has been read and to move students toward independence in reading comprehension (Au, 2009).

This book offers 77 strategies with descriptions, discussions, and examples of how they can be used in different content areas. Included with each strategy are a description and its purpose, content area examples, assessment suggestions, and reflection questions. Depending on the student reading differences in the classroom, these strategies can be used with individuals, small groups, or the entire class.

The strategies have been divided into six sections based on their primary goal. Section One, Checking for Understanding, features strategies that will assist you in assessing the level of students' comprehension and show you how to help students increase their comprehension. Section Two, Fostering Cooperative Learning, contains strategies that will help students work cooperatively—a skill that is necessary in many jobs—and increase their comprehension through peer support. Section Three, Connecting to Previous Knowledge, provides strategies that allow students to connect the information they are reading to knowledge or interests they already have. These strategies are especially useful in motivating students and creating interest in new topics. Section Four, Improving Organization, provides strategies for helping students organize material in a way that will improve their comprehension. These strategies incorporate the use of outlines, charts, and graphic organizers. Section Five, Promoting Independent Learning, offers strategies that students can learn and apply independently in numerous situations. These strategies provide students with a way to approach a particular concept, word, or section of text, or to question and break down the information into steps to increase their levels of understanding. Section Six, Teaching to Learning Style, contains strategies that focus on one or more modes of learning (e.g., visual, auditory, tactile). Because students learn in a variety of ways, you can use these strategies to help students with particular learning styles who have strength in a certain modality. The Appendix, Technology and Comprehension, addresses technology and its possible uses for reading comprehension. It offers brief descriptions of technology and technology-related resources as well as ideas for how each may be used to assist with comprehension in the content areas.

The strategies presented in this collection are not comprehensive, but they will enhance students' learning experiences through a variety of modes and methods that may encourage the reluctant reader and enrich the experience of the enthusiastic reader. This variety gives students the opportunity to gain comprehension through the mode or strategy that best suits them individually. It is my desire that students discover a variety of strategies that will assist them in comprehension that they can use independently as lifelong learners.