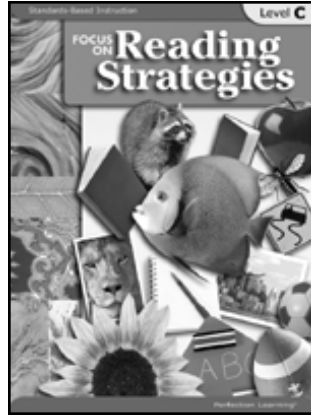


Research-Based Reading Comprehension Instruction *Focus on Reading Strategies*



Overview of Research

The last 25 years have yielded most of what researchers know about reading comprehension. Most of the results are based on studies of how good readers interact with text. Researchers have found that good readers are active or strategic readers who use a variety of comprehension strategies before, during, and after reading a text.

Good readers use comprehension strategies to facilitate the construction of meaning. These strategies include previewing, self-questioning, making connections, visualizing, knowing how words work, monitoring, summarizing, and evaluating. Researchers believe that using such strategies helps students become metacognitive readers (McLaughlin & Allen, 2002).

Some people intuitively become strategic readers. All readers, no matter what their skill levels, benefit greatly from direct instruction in how to interact with a text and process information.

The rationale for the explicit teaching of comprehension skills is that comprehension can be improved by teaching students to use specific cognitive strategies or to reason strategically when they encounter barriers to understanding what they are reading... explicit or formal instruction in the application of comprehension strategies has been shown to be highly effective in enhancing understanding (National Reading Panel, 2002).

Focus on Reading Strategies—Research-Based Instruction

Students on all grade levels need to practice being active readers as they encounter increasingly difficult reading materials on each grade level. The *Focus on Reading Strategies* program is designed for a grade span of three through eight. The reading and interest levels of each Student Book match the intended grade level. Instruction in active reading strategies is scaffolded throughout the program so that each level builds upon and expands what students have learned previously.

Focus on Reading Strategies brings research-based instruction to the classroom. The program focuses on directly teaching active reading strategies that research has proven to most effectively improve reading comprehension.

- Previewing Text
- Self-Questioning
- Making Connections
- Visualizing
- Knowing How Words Work
- Monitoring
- Summarizing
- Evaluating

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Previewing Text

A “Heads Up” section teaches students to use several prereading strategies to help them access background knowledge and make connections with the text.

Activating Prior Knowledge

“Proficient learners build on and activate their background knowledge before reading, writing, speaking, or listening; poor learners begin without thinking.”

—Irvin et al., 1996

We learn new information by connecting it to what we already know to construct meaning. This prior knowledge is called schemata and reflects the experiences, conceptual understanding, attitudes, values, and skills a reader brings to a text situation. “...readers are in a better position to comprehend what they are reading whenever they use prior knowledge (schemata) to construct meaning” (Vacca, 2002).

As students preview each selection in the *Focus on Reading Strategies Student Books*, prompts help them connect their prior knowledge with the selection they will read. For instance, in the Level F (Grade 6) book, students are asked what they know about tsunamis before reading “The Hilo and Aluetian Tsunami.” In the same book, an anticipation guide asks students to identify their feelings about internment camps before they read a letter from a Japanese citizen who was relocated during World War II. In the Level C (Grade 3) book, students begin a KWL chart before reading about Johnny Appleseed.

Learning to think about the text before reading greatly enhances comprehension.

Predicting

“As they read, good readers frequently make predictions about what is to come.”

—Duke & Pearson, 2002

Predicting is also a previewing strategy. Good readers hypothesize about what a text may be about based on textual clues or their own experiences. This previewing strategy helps readers set a goal for reading and focus their thinking.

In the “Heads Up” sections of each *Focus on Reading Student Book*, students are guided to make predictions about the text. They might be asked to skim the selection, make predictions based on key words in the title or the introduction to the selection, or fill out a prediction chart.

The image displays three overlapping pages from a student book. The top page is titled "Unit 4: Analyze Plot Structure" and "Lesson 7 Danger at the Pond • Novel Excerpt". It features a "Heads Up" section with a background image of ice skates. The text reads: "You are about to read an excerpt from the book *The Spy Catchers*. As you read, you need to be aware of what is happening in the story. These are called the events. Stories must have events. Often, the events are guided by the problem. The problem makes the story more interesting." The middle page is titled "Make Sense of Words" and provides strategies for understanding unknown words: "When you come across an unknown word, you can try to understand the meaning by: rereading the sentence and using the context clues... breaking the word into parts... using the dictionary or asking an adult." It includes a numbered list of tasks: "1. Find the word **regret** in paragraph 1. a. Read the sentences around the word and write what you think **regret** means. b. Look up **regret** up in the dictionary and write the definition. c. Can you think of a time in your life when you have felt **regret**? Write about that time in the space below." The bottom page is a story map for "Danger at the Pond" with a title box and three event boxes (Event 1, Event 2, Event 3) connected by downward arrows. Below the events are two boxes labeled "Problem" and "Solution" connected by a horizontal arrow. The background of the bottom page shows a person ice skating on a pond.

Self-Questioning/Making Connections/Monitoring

“Strategic learning during reading is all about monitoring reading and making sense. Skilled readers know how to monitor and keep track of whether the author is making sense by asking questions...”

—*Vacca, 2002*

Students are prompted to self-question as they read the fiction and nonfiction selections in *Focus on Reading Strategies*. Each selection is accompanied by questions for the reader that are highlighted within the text. Columns are provided for students to sketch answers to these running questions as they read.

Students might be asked what they'd like to know more about, what predictions they can make, if a particular detail is important, how something compares to their experiences, what they think the writer means, and so on. As students respond, they are connecting with the text and checking their understanding—essential strategies for successful readers.

Visualizing

“There is an old saying that a picture is worth a thousand words. When it comes to comprehension, this saying might be paraphrased, ‘a visual display helps readers understand, organize, and remember some of those thousand words.’”

—*Duke & Pearson, 2002*

Visual representations of text help a reader see the information again. A graphic “re-presentation” allows readers to see relationships, understand organization, connect ideas, and make abstract ideas concrete.

Focus on Reading Strategies presents many strategies for readers to graphically show their comprehension. In the “Understand by Seeing It” section of each chapter, students are directly taught to

represent their thinking and comprehension through a variety of visual organizers.

- hierarchical organizer
- comparative organizer
- sequential organizer
- diagram
- semantic map
- spider map
- cause/effect organizer
- character map
- Venn diagram
- story frame
- plot chart
- story string
- series of events chain
- Frayer model

Knowing How Words Work

“Research conducted in the past ten years reveals that vocabulary knowledge is the single most important factor contributing to reading comprehension. Moreover, studies conducted on the importance of vocabulary instruction demonstrate that it plays a major role in improving comprehension.”

—*Laflamme, 1997*

For decades, research has shown a direct link between vocabulary development and reading comprehension. Students who read well have a good vocabulary. Balanced language arts programs include a strong component of vocabulary instruction.

Good readers can decipher the meaning of words as they read. They know how to use context clues, base words, word parts, and even a dictionary, when necessary, to understand a new word in text. “Because of the enormous number of words which a mature reader needs to understand, it is important for student to learn how to learn the meanings of new words” (Carr & Wixson, 1986).

In other words, students need to “know how words work.” In the *Focus on Reading Strategies* program, the “Make Sense of Words”

section in each chapter teaches students how to attack new words during reading. They practice using a variety of skills before, during, and after reading.

- Using context clues—definition clues, example clues, contrast clues, and description clues
- Recognizing words with multiple meanings
- Understanding connotative and denotative word meanings
- Understanding meaning through word relationships
- Using part of speech for meaning
- Using personal experiences and background knowledge (schemata)

Strategic readers use these skills to find meaning and develop their vocabulary as they read.

Summarizing

“...research suggests instruction and practice in summarizing not only improves students’ ability to summarize text, but also their overall comprehension of text content.”

—Duke & Pearson, 2002

Summarizing is a difficult task. Students must sift through text, identify unimportant and important ideas, and synthesize the important ideas to create a new text that stands for the original. This skill needs to be reviewed and practiced as students encounter increasingly challenging texts.

Summarizing is directly taught in the Levels F through H (Grades 6 through 8) Student Books in the *Focus on Reading Strategies* program. For example, in the Level F (Grade 6) Student Book, the “Heads Up” section tells students to read a selection about the success

of the 1908 U.S. Olympic hockey team for important details that they will use in a summary. During reading, students write important details in the “Think Along” columns beside the selection. After reading, students choose from a list of sentences the one that best summarizes the selection. Next, students complete a visual organizer that asks questions to help them identify the most important details. Finally, students use the information from the organizer to write a short summary of the team’s success for a local TV newscast. Every activity in the lesson takes students step by step through the process of summarization.

Evaluating

“Effective readers are strategic. They make predictions, organize information, and interact with text. They evaluate the ideas they are reading about in light of what they already know.”

—Barton & Billmeyer, 1998

As good readers interact with text, they evaluate before, during, and after reading. They intuitively consider if the title is something that interests them, if the author is accurately representing the world as they know it, if the author is exaggerating or distorting ideas, if they would recommend the text to another reader, and whom that reader would be. In this way, they are monitoring their understanding and making connections with the text.

For example, in the Level F (Grade 6) *Focus on Reading Strategies* Student Book, readers evaluate the effects of an advertisement. Before reading the ad, students consider what techniques attract them to products advertised in the media. As they read the text advertisement, they look for specific techniques used to persuade

the intended audience. After reading, a visual organizer helps students to analyze the impact of the word choice, the repetition of ideas, and other persuasive techniques. Finally, students evaluate the effectiveness of the advertisement on the intended audience.

Reading comprehension is arguably the most important skill a child learns. Learning to be a strategic, active reader is important for success in all content areas. “The literacy learning that takes place in adolescents between the ages of 10 and 18 is of critical importance in preparing for life in and out of school” (Vacca, 2002). The *Focus on Reading Strategies* program equips students with research-based comprehension strategies that will make them motivated and successful readers and thinkers.

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