# The Comprehension Toolkit
# Research Base

Since you are consulting this section, we assume you are already knowledgeable about the importance of (and research base for) explicit instruction in comprehension strategies. If not, we invite you to consult *Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension for Understanding and Engagement.* (2007)

The pedagogy and curriculum of *The Comprehension Toolkit* are grounded in research-based principles. Following are key principles that underpin the Toolkit lessons.

## Proficient readers use specific strategies to construct meaning from text.

**WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS:** Each of the strategies in *The Comprehension Toolkit* is supported by multiple research studies that were summarized by Pearson, Dole, Duffy, and Roehler (1992) as they determined those strategies that active, thoughtful readers use when constructing meaning from text. They found that proficient readers

- search for connections between what they know and the new information in the text.
- ask questions of themselves, the author, and the text.
- draw inferences during and after reading.
- distinguish important and less important ideas in a text.
- synthesize information within and across texts.
- monitor understanding and repair faulty comprehension.

Pressley (1976) and Keene and Zimmerman (1997) added sensory imaging to this list.

- visualize and create mental images of ideas in the text

**WHAT *THE COMPREHENSION TOOLKIT* DOES:** As their titles suggest, each of the strategy cluster books in *The Comprehension Toolkit* focuses on a research-based active reading strategy: *Monitor Comprehension, Activate & Connect, Ask Questions, Infer & Visualize, Determine Importance,* and *Summarize & Synthesize.* The lessons in each cluster book build on one another to give kids multifaceted ways to construct meaning. As kids approach each new text, they practice another dimension of the strategy, gaining confidence as the unit progresses.

## Teaching multiple strategies in an authentic context improves comprehension.

**WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS:** Recent research studies have described the effectiveness of transactional strategy instruction (Pressley 2002; Guthrie 2003). Rather than a single strategy focus, transactional strategy instruction teaches students a repertoire of strategies that they apply flexibly according to the demands of the reading tasks and texts they encounter. Pressley (2002) found that students who were taught a group of strategies performed better than those receiving more traditional instruction when asked to think aloud about and interpret texts. These findings seem to hold true for younger children (Pearson and Duke 2001) and for students learning information in content topics such as science (Reutzel, Smith, and Fawson 2005).

**WHAT *THE COMPREHENSION TOOLKIT* DOES:** Each of the strategy cluster books in *The Comprehension Toolkit* focuses on developing multiple aspects of a single strategy—but not to the exclusion of other strategies. The emphasis is on guiding and responding to the kids' own efforts to get meaning from a real nonfiction text—from tradebooks, childrens' magazines, and other contexts kids are likely to encounter or consult in the course of learning about their world.

## Explicit instruction within the gradual release of responsibility model is effective in teaching comprehension strategies.

**WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS:** In a research review, Pearson and Gallagher (1983) found not only that strategy use and monitoring were characteristic of more mature and better readers but also that one model of instruction—a gradual release of responsibility model that emphasized guided practice, independent practice, and feedback—was effective in training students to summarize an expository passage, ask questions about it, detect difficult portions, and make prediction about following passages, eventually assuming responsibility for monitoring these tasks themselves.

**WHAT *THE COMPREHENSION TOOLKIT* DOES:** *The Comprehension Toolkit* lessons follow a consistent but flexible teaching approach that begins with intensive teacher guidance and gradually turns the lesson over to the kids. CONNECT & ENGAGE opens the lesson by tapping into the kids' background knowledge and natural curiosity before moving to MODEL where the teacher provides an explicit model of the strategy using the opening parts of the texts the group is working with. During GUIDE, the teacher leads students into trying out the strategy and sharing their ideas about the text before beginning to COLLABORATE with peers or work independently (INDEPENDENT PRACTICE) to deepen their understanding. Finally, they come back together and SHARE THE LEARNING as a whole group. Over time, students learn to apply strategies to foster understanding on their own, throughout the day and across the curriculum.

## An active learning environment in which curious kids collaboratively read, write, talk, and create promotes comprehension.

**WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS:** For two decades, Fred Newmann and his colleagues have been studying "authentic instruction"—instruction that is highly engaging and interactive, and which connects to students' real lives—and the impact of such instruction on customary measures of schooling, including the high stakes standardized test scores. In two recent studies of Chicago public school students, the researchers found that when teachers offered *less didactic* and *more interactive* experiences, scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills rose significantly among a large cross section of students. (Newmann 2001; Smith, Lee, and Newmann 2001). Further, in an article reporting results of an NICHD Early Child Care and Youth Development Research study, Pianta , Belsky, Houts, and Morrison (2007) discuss the impact of the emotional and instructional classroom climate on student performance and growth. They conclude that "opportunities to learn in small groups, to improve analytical skills, [and] to interact extensively with teachers…add depth to students' understanding." These studies confirm what reading researchers have observed for decades: engaged kids learn more. Allington and Johnston's (2002) purposeful talk; Perkins's (1992) culture of thinking; Palincsar and Brown's (1984) reciprocal teaching; and Davey's (1983) think-alouds all suggest that kids with something to do with text actually process it better.

**WHAT *THE COMPREHENSION TOOLKIT* DOES:** In every lesson in *The Comprehension Toolkit,* either Stephanie Harvey or Anne Goudvis has meticulously chronicled the ways they engage students' minds and hearts with texts and ideas. Immersed in talk—with each other and with Steph or Anne—kids record notes, respond, build on each other's thoughts, and become genuinely engaged with texts and ideas. The lessons in Toolkit are a window into the active learning environment that is every teacher's goal.

## References


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