COMPREHENSION from the GROUND UP

Simplified, Sensible Instruction for the K–3 Reading Workshop

CD-ROM includes 32 reproducibles and study guide

Sharon Taberski  Author of On Solid Ground
This is a book I have been waiting for since Sharon’s first publication, On Solid Ground. Again Sharon does not disappoint. It is filled with sensible, practical, and innovative ways to help students gain real meaning from what they read. Sharon is a master at understanding how children best learn the essentials of reading comprehension. This is a book that every K–3 teacher needs to read.

—Tony Stead, coauthor of Explorations in Nonfiction Writing

In many classrooms today instruction feels frenzied, superficial, and choppy. Sharon describes teaching that is focused, meaningful, and cohesive and reminds us that teaching is not about “covering” material, it’s about learning the material. I wish every child could have Sharon Taberski for their teacher.

—Nell K. Duke, Michigan State University, Literacy Achievement Research Center

This remarkable book shows teachers how to be knowledgeable and reflective. It brims with high-quality literacy practices that allow teachers to meet the goals of RTI or new standards on their own terms and in child-centered ways. Sharon provides the engaging, meaningful activities teachers need to differentiate their reading instruction throughout the day. Comprehension from the Ground Up will virtually change the face of comprehension and how it is addressed in schools—and teachers and children everywhere will reap the benefits.

—Mary Howard, author of Moving Forward with RTI and RTI from All Sides
Sharon Taberski provides K–3 teachers everything they need to know to simplify comprehension instruction while keeping it appropriate, rigorous, enjoyable, and always focused on the children. In *Comprehension from the Ground Up*, Taberski applies research and extensive teaching experience to re-envision, refine, and slow down the teaching of comprehension. She provides instructional specifics on skills and strategies, fluency, vocabulary development, independent reading, minilessons, conferences, guided reading groups, and much more. This “must-have-it” book for primary teachers provides a wealth of substantive ideas, explicit teaching strategies, and valuable text resources to support and inspire reading and writing across genres.

—Regie Routman, author of *Regie Routman in Residence: Transforming Our Teaching*, DVD-based series

With this book, we can put aside programs and curricula that place undue pressure on our K–3 students and take them away from meaningful literacy. Taberski offers a remarkably wise set of practices and activities that facilitate children’s development as engaged readers. She is a gentle mentor for other teachers, helping them teach with rigor and smartness while savoring the “now” of children’s lives. What I really love about Sharon’s work is that she is like a feisty big sister, readily calling to question practices that don’t make sense, and replacing them with practices that do, all because she cares so deeply about children and teachers. This will be a treasured, foundational resource for years to come.

—Gretchen Owocki, author of *The RTI Daily Planning Book, K–6*

Sharon Taberski does it again, bringing simplicity, sanity, and sensitivity to the teaching of literacy in the early grades. In *Comprehension from the Ground Up*, Sharon helps teachers sift through the endless bombardment of instructional suggestions and mandates that come across their desks, demonstrating the importance of having a set of crystal-clear priorities. Along the way, Sharon surprises her readers with such inviting new practices as content-area literacy centers, synopsis texts, companion sets, teacher-tailored collections, and Ta-Da publications. An incredible work of scholarship and innovation.

—Shelley Harwayne, author of *Novel Perspectives*
COMPREHENSION from the GROUND UP

Simplified, Sensible Instruction for the K..3 Reading Workshop

Sharon Taberski

HEINEMANN
PORTSMOUTH, NH
To my friend and editor Wendy Murray
for making it happen
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Acknowledgments

This book has been a long time coming... a very long time coming. Many starts and stops and lots of chapter ones along the way. My dear friend Ann Marie often teased that I should just do a book of chapter ones and be done with it. I couldn’t laugh then, but I can smile now and say quite emphatically—I’m glad it took so long to write this follow-up to On Solid Ground because it gave me much needed time to read, learn, grow, teach children, interact with colleagues, reflect, and revise how I think comprehension is best taught to K–3 readers. A topic as important as comprehension instruction can’t be rushed. And it certainly wasn’t.

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—Sharon Taberski
September 2010

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Credits, continued

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Part One

Defining Our Teaching
Any book worth its salt is an argument. From the novelist’s love story to the nonfiction author’s account of a famous shipwreck, writers declare a deeply considered point of view. Their books are one big *This-is-how-I-see-it* portrait and often explicitly or implicitly challenge other prevailing ideas. For me, I want to declare a way of teaching K–3 readers that is based on more than three decades of classroom experience as well as recent research. The feisty argument of this book that will help you teach? That teachers and children are trapped in a skewed metaphor of “five pillars” that grew out of the National Reading Panel Report of 2000, and as a result comprehension has been reduced to a pillar—a set of strategies—when it’s actually what reading is all about.

I’ve been in too many classrooms across this country in the last couple of years, visited too many publishers’ displays at state and national conferences, and had access to too many literacy programs where I see teachers continuing down the wrong instructional path as a result of this decade-old misrepresentation. So here’s how I think the pillars notion we’ve bought into is distorted, and how with a little revision, the pillars of teaching reading become a pretty marvelous metaphor to have in mind as we plan and teach. Remember folks used to think the world is flat? Changing the pillars might not be as
game-changing as showing the world is round, but I do think the paradigms we live by are powerful influences, and if we can correct the image, our daily teaching will come into focus and become sharper and more doable than we ever imagined.

Re-Envisioning the Pillars

Within a year of the National Reading Panel Report (2000), the professional literature and commercial teaching resources began referring to *The Five Pillars of Effective Reading Instruction*. While the report showed a strong research base for the following five areas of teaching reading, it never meant for these five to be championed at the expense of all other aspects of literacy, but wow, these five took hold—and their top billing in textbooks and educational resources made them even mightier. The five pillars heralded:

- phonemic awareness
- phonics
- fluency
- vocabulary
- comprehension

Don’t get me wrong, each one of these five is important to children’s reading. But it’s an incomplete list and therefore problematic that these five became so sacred that other critical aspects of literacy got sidelined.

I remember when I first saw the five listed I almost fell off my chair. Imagine a doctor reading a report from the Surgeon General declaring the body’s vital organs are: the brain, the heart, the collar bone, the kidneys, and the femur. *The collar bone? The femur? Are you kidding?* The Surgeon General would have been run out of town.

The five pillars of reading forgot the lungs, so to speak—some of the essential experiences and skills children need in order to breathe as readers, including oral language development, writing, and background knowledge. And they elevated to pillar status skills, like phonemic awareness, that, although important, aren’t pillar-worthy.

Granted, the panel’s decision to include these five elements of reading instruction and not others rested on their mandate to only examine research having a broad empirical base. However, in doing so, they eliminated hundreds of reputable research studies and the knowledge and insight teachers have accumulated through years of experience.

In the New Thinking on the Pillars of Reading graphic, you will see how I re-envision the pillars to better reflect how children learn to read. The biggest change I make is that comprehension isn’t a pillar at all—it’s the overarching pediment, supported *atop* the pillars. Everything leads to the pinnacle—understanding what we read—and plays a part in children’s comprehension development. And further, comprehension is far more than just comprehension strategies teaching, far more than the formula of phonemic awareness, plus phonics, plus fluency... = reading approach.

In this book, I offer the re-envisioned pillars to help you create a structure for teaching reading and writing that develops children’s comprehension organically
rather than in the hyper overdrive we’ve been experiencing for several years as a result of embracing “the big 5” with all its attendant pressure to get kids farther, faster. I share practical ideas so you’ll know how to fill your days with rich literacy experiences. You’ll find dozens of activities and practices, schedules, favorite books, photos of classrooms and students, management ideas, sample lessons—all of the details you need to teach reading in K–3 in a simplified, streamlined way.

I’ll show you how to slow down, to not worry about checking children’s reading rates constantly, or think that if you aren’t teaching comprehension strategies 24/7, you’re not teaching reading well. In too many classrooms I hear stories of how children call the fast readers the good readers, perpetuating a damaging misconception. In too many classrooms I get the sense that children are using the lingo of comprehension without truly engaging with and understanding the texts they are reading. We’ve all witnessed students rotely recording the text-to-text and text-to-self connections they’ve made, with all the thoughtfulness of writing “I will not run in the hallway” a hundred times. This is not what strategy-based instruction was ever intended to be.

In part, the distortion occurred because the pressures in education in recent years have not allowed teachers the “think” time to factor in the practicality and developmental appropriateness of their practices. As a result, our youngest readers, in grades K–3, are too often asked to apply strategies that are better suited for older,
more mature readers. (See Chapter 10 for more about schoolwide developmentally appropriate comprehension strategy instruction.)

To be sure, children need to eventually develop a repertoire of higher-order cognitive strategies to use when and if needed, and this can begin in K–3 classrooms. But showcasing these strategies—to the extent that they’re given too much weight and take up too much time—can distract us from teaching children all the skills and strategies they need to become better, comprehending readers.

Children in K–3 should leave school with minds brimming with all the information they learned from that great ocean animal book they read together, or smiling at the memory of Amelia Bedelia or Kevin Henkes’ spunky Lily. And teachers should end the day feeling confident that children’s interactions with Lily, Amelia Bedelia, and the great white shark (along with the comprehension instruction they so artfully embedded) have enhanced their children’s developing reading achievement and their comprehension. These experiences should have brought children one step closer to becoming motivated, confident, self-improving readers, who automatically call up appropriate strategies when they sense their connection to a book’s meaning is faltering.

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**Something to Consider**

In 2009 Peter Dewitz, Jennifer Jones, and Susan Leahy published a study in *Reading Research Quarterly* called “Comprehension Strategy Instruction in Core Reading Programs” where they examined five of the most widely used core programs for how they recommended comprehension be taught in grades 3, 4, and 5. While each of these programs claimed to be research-based, the study’s findings showed that comprehension strategy instruction was implemented far differently in the core programs than in the original research. For the most part, the core programs:

- didn’t provide for the same degree or amount of independent and guided practice as the original research
- didn’t consistently follow the gradual release of responsibility model where teachers first demonstrate in whole-group settings and then gradually relinquish control to the point where students are applying the target strategy on their own
- neglected to consistently follow the guidelines for explicit instruction, which insist that teachers relate one strategy to another and make clear their impact on learning to read

Each of these aberrations is likely to impact the program’s effectiveness and compromise children’s developing ability to comprehend text.

Although Dewitz, Jones, and Leahy studied teaching and learning in the intermediate grades, we can extrapolate that similar use of core programs and distortions of the metacognitive strategies occur in the lower grades as well. Lost in translation are adequate time for independent and guided practice; explicit teaching of skills and strategies in a way that immediately highlights for children their connectedness to real literature; and scaffolded comprehension strategy instruction so that they carry it into their independent reading.
In this book I offer a blueprint for a simpler and more developmentally appropriate approach to comprehension instruction. It’s one that embraces a full range of experiences, skills, and strategies that lead not just to learning a set of meta-cognitive strategies to apply to texts, but to a richer, more genuine, reading experience.

In the chapters that follow I organize classroom routines and lessons around these fundamental needs of children:

- **Children need us to be their advocates.** *(See Chapter 2: Five Child-Centered Principles to Guide You)*

I suspect that if you’re reading this book, I’m preaching to the choir, but think about it: students in grades K–3 are between five- and nine-years-old. That’s very young when you step back and consider how recently they were preschoolers just learning the alphabet. At home they’re still getting lost with race cars and dollhouses, slumbering with stuffed animals and their nightlight on, and yet in school we expect them to read complex texts.

For example, asking all emergent readers to reach a fixed reading level by the end of kindergarten that we know is unlikely and inappropriate simply because that’s where our core reading program sets the bar is harmful and demoralizing. Asking struggling first graders to take a fluency assessment every two weeks that bears little resemblance to the books they’re reading in class—no pictures, no color, no supportive language structures, nothing that scaffolds their reading and makes them feel successful and motivated to read more—erodes students’ self-confidence and makes them pull back. This is especially true of our English language learners.

If we truly want to differentiate instruction, then small groups and one-to-one teaching are the way to go. And it is simply wrong to withhold the precious time students need to delight in reading books from their just-right bag that will help them consolidate the skills and strategies they’re trying to acquire because we’ve used up all our time with lengthy whole-group instruction.

At some point we’re going to have to take a stand and truly stand up for children. We know that many of the things we’re being asked to do in the name of “raising the scores” is neither in our children’s best interests nor good for them. Therefore we must acquire knowledge of effective and sensible teaching practices and make our voices heard.

- **Children need ample opportunities to read widely and across genres, to write texts for others to comprehend, and to engage in thoughtful conversation.** *(See Chapters 3, 4, and 5: Time to Read, Write, and Talk)*

Children need time to read, write, and talk. Without these basic experiences, the skills and strategies we so diligently try to teach cannot take root and grow.

[C]omprehension instruction should be balanced. By this we mean that good comprehension instruction includes both explicit instruction in specific comprehension strategies and a great deal of time and opportunity for actual reading, writing, and discussion of text. (p. 207)

It’s folly to think that it is sufficient to demonstrate reading skills and strategies without also giving children time to try them out on their own. If we want children to develop as readers, they must have abundant opportunities to write texts for others to comprehend. Children need to experience the meaning-making nature of written text from the inside out, empowering them to become more insightful and skilled readers. They also need to talk about books and pieces they’re writing with other readers and writers to hear different points of view and ways of expressing ideas and information.

- **Children need to read accurately and fluently with comprehension.**  
(See Chapter 6: Accurate Fluent Reading)

We want students to read words accurately with appropriate speed, intonation, and emphasis so that they understand what they’re reading. We want them to laugh at the funny parts and be moved to tears when things go badly for the characters. We want our young readers to learn new information about the world and ultimately about themselves. In her chapter “Fluency in the Classroom: Strategies for Whole-Class and Group Work,” Melanie Kuhn (2003) reports:

There is a general consensus that fluent reading not only incorporates automatic and accurate word recognition and expressive rendering of text, but it is also likely to be a contributing factor in a reader’s ability to construct meaning from what is being read. (p. 128)

To achieve this level of engagement and understanding, children must develop accurate fluent reading, as it has everything to do with comprehension. Our brain has a limited amount of mental capacity in its working memory, and if most of it is directed at sounding out words, there isn’t enough left to understand the ideas and information the author is trying to communicate.

- **Children need to acquire background knowledge to bring to texts they read.**  
(See Chapter 7: Background Knowledge)

Background knowledge, as I refer to it in this book, is our knowledge of the natural world that readers bring to text, a subpart of their all-inclusive prior knowledge. It’s their firsthand experiences about a topic, the information they’ve acquired through reading and content-area studies, and the attitudes and opinions regarding this background knowledge that they hold. Because learning is actually connecting what we know with what we’re learning, background knowledge plays a critical role in children’s reading success.

...[B]ackground knowledge makes one a better reader in two ways. First, it means that there is a greater probability that you will have the knowledge to successfully make the necessary inferences to understand.... Second, rich background knowledge means that you will rarely need to reread a text in an effort to consciously search for connections in the text. (pp. 32–33)

The more a child knows about a topic, the easier it is to read, understand, and remember the important ideas. New information gets integrated into the child’s existing understandings or schemata. For example, when a child first experiences or reads about a ladybug—when someone tells her about them, or she finds one herself, or when she sees a picture or reads a book—a “hook” forms. A concept is now in her brain. From then on, whenever she experiences ladybugs, either firsthand or vicariously, new information latches on to that hook. This becomes her background knowledge—the very knowledge that makes it easier for her to read and learn new information.

- **Children need to extend their oral language and vocabulary, and capitalize on how they enhance reading comprehension.** *(See Chapter 8: Oral Language and Vocabulary)*

Oral language, as it relates to reading comprehension, involves children hearing elaborative language that is spoken and read aloud. But most importantly, it is the spoken language of students as they articulate their own ideas and opinions and build their understanding of text through discussion. In *Exploring the Literature of Fact: Children’s Nonfiction Trade Books in the Elementary School*, Barbara Moss (2002) explains:

> Literacy learning is socially constructed. Students do not learn to be literate in isolation, but through social interaction with others. By talking about the text they read, students collaboratively construct meanings around text. *(p. 126)*

Developing students’ oral language and building their vocabulary go hand in hand. As children share their ideas out loud and hear how their classmates respond, they refine their understanding of how words convey meaning, transport information, and communicate ideas, and that talk lies at the very heart of comprehension and learning. Their growing vocabulary enables them to
understand passages that would be incomprehensible without knowing the meaning of individual words and concepts.

- **Children need to appreciate not only how reading impacts writing, but how their experience as writers enables them to adopt an insider’s stance as they read.** *(See Chapter 9: Reading-Writing Connections)*

Reading and writing nourish each another and, in my experience, it’s actually easier to teach them as mirror images than as separate entities. Reading-writing connections are the implicit and explicit relationships between these two reciprocal processes.

Children who read acquire knowledge and skills they can bring to texts they write. Through wide reading across genres, children gain information and new ideas, pick up on text features, appreciate the power of words to persuade, and understand the power of helpful phrases writers use to transition from one idea to the next. A child’s stance as a reader trying to understand the written word makes him more aware that his job as a writer is to make his ideas understandable to others.

Likewise, when children are engaged in writing texts to share with others, they become more attentive readers. They notice punctuation, appreciate how a text is organized to help access information, and marvel at an author’s word choice and how it helps create an image in their minds. The 2010 Carnegie Corporation report, *Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve Reading*, concurs:

> …[H]aving students spend more time writing has a positive impact on their reading, increasing how well students comprehend texts written by others. *(p. 5)*

Just as reading influences children’s writing, writing influences students’ reading comprehension in powerful ways.

- **Children need to acquire a repertoire of meta-cognitive strategies to help them navigate difficult texts and reconstruct meaning when it breaks down. These strategies should be presented in a developmentally appropriate and systematic way throughout the elementary grades.** *(See Chapter 10: Repertoire of Strategies)*

Children need to know that when comprehension falters or when they face a challenge, there are things they can do to get through the rough spots. As Nell K. Duke and P. David Pearson (2002) advise in “Effective Practices for Developing Reading Comprehension”:

> A large volume of work indicates that we can help students acquire the strategies and processes used by good readers—and that this improves their overall comprehension of text, both the texts used to teach the strategies and texts they read on their own in the future. *(p. 206)*

Thus, having a repertoire of strategies to rely on greatly enhances children’s overall reading enjoyment and comprehension.
Ideally, schools should decide upon a repertoire of six or so kid-friendly, meta-cognitive strategies, e.g., visualize to experience, ask questions and wonder, set a purpose for reading, that they want their students to learn by the time they graduate, and then determine how to teach these strategies in developmentally appropriate ways across the grades. This type of schoolwide planning is the best way to ensure a cohesive curriculum.

In kindergarten and first grade, teachers can demonstrate these comprehension strategies as opportunities arise naturally during read-aloud and shared reading (always keeping the pleasure of book reading and literature center stage), and invite students to participate in this whole-class experience, knowing that some of these same strategies will resurface during guided reading.

Second- and third-grade teachers ought to plan focus strategy units where students attend to one strategy per two-to-three-week unit, with an opportunity to practice these strategies on their own and come together as a class to process how it went. Likewise, fourth- and fifth-grade teachers should offer integrated strategy units to help students become savvy about when to use these strategies and how they work in combination.

More than anything, we need to simplify comprehension instruction and, in doing so, increase its effectiveness. For not only must the text make sense, but our teaching must make sense as well.

- Children need to engage in an assortment of carefully selected learning experiences presented in whole-class, small-group, and one-to-one settings.

Just as it’s essential that students integrate their use of comprehension strategies, deciding which one or combination will help them gain meaning that has been lost or is difficult to discern, teachers need to select a handful of practices from the thousands out there and do them well. They must reflect on what their students need to learn and match this up with practices to help get them there.

In addition to the dozens of highly engaging ideas and foundational practices described in Chapters 1–10, in Chapters 6–10—the chapters that focus on five key aspects of comprehension—you will also find a section called Effective Practices. From letter and sound searches, to Ta-Da Publishing Books, to content-area literacy centers, these effective practices, indicated by the tab on the page, can help enhance your literacy instruction repertoire.
There are some Effective Practices highlighted in later chapters.
Cultivating Readers

The title of this book, Comprehension from the Ground Up, and its companion DVD, Lessons from the Ground Up (2011), express my conviction that to develop young readers who understand texts and enjoy reading we have to recognize that comprehension is like a bright green shoot that grows after we nourish children’s varied experiences with text. Reading, writing, talking (and the skills and strategies involved in accurate fluent reading, background knowledge, oral language and vocabulary, reading-writing connections, and a repertoire of strategies)—they all cultivate comprehension.

In each chapter I want you to take what I say and think about your students. Not just your class as a whole, but about particular students—those who amaze you with their reading progress and the ones who keep you up at night with concern.

Children today are learning to read, write, ride bikes, do cartwheels, and ask questions in a world that is more anxious than it was a decade ago. Many adults are not as sure-footed or optimistic as they were in earlier generations, and so all the more reason to teach in a manner that is nurturing and highly responsive to each child.

Children need us teachers on so many levels. Let’s not forget to be warm and funny and model our own enthusiasm for reading, writing, and thinking. Sure, we can be rigorous, but that doesn’t mean rigorous in our service to external test scores. It means rigorous in our service to children, to using our expertise to know where each of them is as a reader, a writer, and a thinker and where to take them next.

No matter how you’re teaching now, I assure you the practices I outline in this book are worth the effort of taking them on. In time you will become more accomplished at integrating them into a cohesive whole. The same slow and steady approach to teaching I advocate in the next chapter also applies to your professional development: give yourself the time to grow at a pace that is right for you.
Appendices

See the attached CD for all these classroom resources.

1. Main Events: Fiction
2. Reading Log (Kindergarten and Beginning of First Grade)
3. Weekly Reading Log (First Grade and Early Second Grade)
4. Reading Log and Reflection Sheet (Middle of Second Grade and Third Grade)
5. Response Sheet (Kindergarten and First Grade)
6. Response Sheet (Middle of First Grade and Early Second Grade)
7. Homework Sheet (Sample)
8. Literature Discussion Group Record
9. My Words: Words I Want to Learn
10. How to Work with Elkonin Boxes
11. Dolch Word Lists
12. Building and Using Background Knowledge
13. Making Inferences
14. Alphabet Picture Board
15. Shared Language Arts and Visual Literacy Standards (Adapted from Johanna Riddle)
16. “In the Book” and “In My Head” Sheets
17. Topic List Sheet
18. Graphic Organizer for Character Study
19. Organizing Sheet
20. Get the Picture
21. Beginning, Middle, and End
22. Main Ideas: Nonfiction
23. I’m Reading to . . .
24. Integrating Strategies
25. Thinking About Text Structure—Story Elements
26. Parts of the Whole
27. My Purposeful Reading Log
28. Before and After
29. Turn Titles into Questions
30. Sketch What You Learned
31. Getting the Gist
32. Guided Reading Sheets for Emergent, Early, Transitional, and Fluent Readers
Thank you for sampling this resource.

For more information or to purchase, please visit Heinemann by clicking the link below:


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