

Study guide to use with *To Understand* by Ellin Oliver Keene

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As I was reading *To Understand* for the first time, it struck me as a clearly written summary of what teachers must know so they can guide their students to become strong readers and writers. I suggested that my principal buy each staff member a copy, and I led them in a monthly discussion. Below is a list of activities or questions that we discussed. I hope this guide will be helpful to other teachers who also want to know how to teach their students how to understand better.

After reading Chapter 1 and Chapter 2

To explain the Dimension of Understanding model, Ellin says, “The second part of this model (Figure 2.2b) seeks to define and describe what we experience in our lives when we are intellectually engaged—the behaviors and reactions we may exhibit when in the process of understanding.” (page 28)

Activity: Dimensions Reflection

1. Look at the list of dimensions on page 27. When have you exhibited any of these behaviors?
2. Each dimension is illustrated throughout *To Understand* in the Mentor sections of chapters 3–9. Read the Mentor sections paying attention to the corresponding dimension. How does being aware of these dimensions help you with your understanding? Consider sharing with your students when you experience these behaviors. Encourage your students to do the same. Can you add other famous people to the list who demonstrate these dimensions?

Chapter	Dimension	Mentor
3	Driven to understand—we are fervent	Vincent Van Gough
4	Dwell in ideas	Edward Hopper
5	Struggle for insight	Reynolds Price
6	Passionately interested in a wide range of topics	Thinkers and Artists of the Renaissance
7	Revise our thinking; the learning changes us	Pablo Neruda
8	Engage in rigorous discourse about ideas	Matisse and Picasso
9	Understanding is enriched when we have emotional connections	Edwidge Danticat

After reading Chapter 3

Activity: Literacy Studio Model

1. Read the descriptions of the Literacy Studio Model carefully (pages 55–65). Highlight the descriptions that you see yourself doing now and star the descriptions that you would consider starting.
2. Reflection: Are there aspects of your literacy block that you might refine? Are there aspects that you definitely do well? Share this information as a staff and consider setting up a time to go watch a colleague teach.

After reading Chapter 4 and Chapter 5

Ellin states, “It is imperative that we understand each of the six systems and provide well-balanced instruction...and that we minimize or eliminate content that doesn’t support the development of the systems.” (page 127)

Activity One: Six Essential Sort

1. Divide your paper into six equal parts and using the chart on page 113, place one system in each part. Then make word cards related to reading and writing skills. Words can include: decoding, chunking, phonemic awareness, acts out skit based on book, Literature Circles, using think-alouds to share understanding, uses background knowledge, able to read fluently, recognizes sight words, has inferential understanding, it sounds the way we talk, grammar, subject-verb agreement, science content words, understands subtle differences in word meaning, listening center.
2. Now using pages 114–124 as a guide, sort the words to show which words match each system. Add and sort other words that relate to your teaching of reading and writing.
3. Reflection: Think about your teaching. Does your instruction include all six systems? Is your systems instruction well-balanced? Complete this sentence: *At my grade level, I see the Cognitive Systems being taught in the following way....*

Activity Two: Appendix B

1. Read Appendix B noticing what Ellin suggests as the essentials we must teach.
2. Reflection: Think about what you teach now. After reading Appendix B, might you make changes? As Ellin says, it is best “to teach a few important concepts in depth over a long

period of time and have students apply them in a variety of texts and contexts.” (page 127) Are you doing this? How could you do this? Are there aspects of your teaching that could be put on the back burner or eliminated?

After reading Chapter 6

Ellin suggests, “...there are several clear reasons for children to work in leveled (instructional or independent-level) text and other reasons for children to work in text of their own choosing, including text in which the ideas and some of the words may be a bit challenging.” (page 150).

Activity: Leveled text vs. Challenging Text

1. Look through chapter 6 to discover the benefits of using leveled texts and challenging texts.
2. Reflection: What kinds of books do your students read? Are they getting a dose of both leveled and challenging books? What can you do to encourage this balance?

After reading Chapter 7

Ellin explains, “Text structure instruction helps children understand the infrastructure of texts across all genres.” (page 177)

Activity: Text Structures

1. Examine figure 7.1 on page 178. Do you teach these essential text structures?
2. Read through chapter 7 and jot down ways to help students to read and understand these text structures.

After reading Chapter 8 and Appendix A and Appendix G

Ellin commands on page 205, “Think aloud in crafting sessions and invitational groups to reveal how proficient readers use comprehension strategies to enhance and amplify understanding.”

Activity: Plan a Think-aloud

1. Choose a provocative text with which to read and think aloud.
2. Look at Appendix A and choose a comprehension strategy to teach while reading.
3. Look at pages 237–239. Plan what outcome you will discuss while reading and thinking.
4. Look at page 27. Plan which dimension you will discuss while reading and thinking.
5. Read the text and plan when you will stop to share your thinking.

6. Reflection: Is your reading and thinking deeper now that you are incorporating outcomes and dimensions with strategic reading? Consider sharing as a staff these think-aloud lessons.

After reading Chapter 9

Ellin explains, “I began to ask myself, colleagues, and children this question: What did your use of the strategy help you understand? What do you understand about this text that you might not have understood without the strategy?” (page 236)

Activity: Identifying Outcomes

1. In table groups, read *Bigmama* by Donald Crews (HarperCollins, 1998) or any book where strategic reading will occur and record in two columns the strategy you used while reading and the outcome that happened in your mind when using the identified strategy.
2. Refer to the outcome chart on pages 237–239 to help.
3. Example:

Strategy	outcome: setting empathy
I made a connection because I’ve ridden on a train before	I really know the train setting. I can hear the sounds of the train and see the trees blurry out the window. Yet, I only went for 1 day to NYC. They must live far away because it’s taking 3 days.

4. Challenge—start referring to the outcome chart when teaching comprehension strategies. Practice not only identifying strategies you use as you read, but also the outcomes of using the strategy. Encourage your students to do the same. Start adding strategies and outcomes to your anchor charts.

After reading Appendix C

Ellin lists the conditions necessary for a successful reading and writing workshop. Read through the list. Reflect on your reading and writing workshop. How is your workshop similar to this list? How does it differ? How could you make improvements?

After reading Appendix E

Ellin lists ways students can share their thinking about a book. The list includes written, artistic, oral, and dramatic ideas. Read through the list and consider having your students try activities listed.

After reading Appendix H

Ellin lists the best practices in oral-language teaching and learning. She makes the suggestion to have a colleague observe you or to videotape yourself to see if you demonstrate these best practices. Read through the list and start being conscious of your oral language in front of your students. Consider setting up a time to go watch and listen to a colleague teach to discover additional ways to orally interact with your students.