



Study Guide

Comprehension from the Ground Up

by Sharon Taberski

Learning is inherently social. Though sometimes we feel isolated as teachers, most of us know the remedy and the benefits of taking time to engage with colleagues. It is in these conversations that we find our own ideas clarified and enriched. I think you'll find this book brimming with "the goods" for rich discussions. Consider working with a group to mine the ideas for your own teaching. While there are many ways to structure a study group, it is most important to foster a climate in which teachers and staff developers feel free and safe to participate in ongoing conversations and a free-flowing exchange of ideas. Other guidelines can make book study more productive. Here are a few things you might consider.

Watch Group Size: You may want to kick off discussion with a general question and then break into smaller groups. Often the optimal group size is four or five members to ensure there is time for all to exchange ideas. The larger group can reassemble at the end to debrief.

Use Study Questions: Some groups find it more comfortable to start with a few questions to get conversation going. There are various ways to use questions and the following are ideas to get you started:

- ✓ Put three or four questions in an envelope and randomly pull them out for discussion.
- ✓ Create a chart with two or three starter questions and ask the group to generate more, tapping their own personal interests and needs.
- ✓ Decide on three or four questions and divide the group by interest in the various topics. This allows for a more in-depth study.
- ✓ Make copies of the suggested questions for everyone and invite discussion without deciding where to start.



Plan an Agenda: Make sure you have planned a beginning and ending time and *always* honor those times. Teachers are busy and knowing there will be a set time to start and a time to end is important.

Stay Focused on the Topic: Plan a procedure that is transparent. You might start by saying something like, “Let’s decide on a signal to use when we feel the discussion is drifting,” and then have everyone agree to help stay focused.

Include Everyone: Keep groups small enough so that even the quietest member is encouraged to speak. Active listening on everyone’s part will help. Remember that periods of silence should be expected when people are thinking.

Share Leadership: Rotate group facilitation. Identify several duties for the facilitator. Examples might include a discussion format, suggesting a big idea from a chapter or group of chapters, and synthesizing or summarizing at the end. Remember that in a study group, *everyone* is a learner. This isn’t the place for an expert!

Create a List of Norms: Simple expectations that are transparent often make study groups function with greater ease and increase potential for success. These can be simple and might include ways to invite a tentative member into the conversation, expectations about listening, start and stop times, and a procedure for refocusing.

Set Dates for the Next Meeting: Always leave knowing when you will meet again and who will facilitate.

Engage in Reflection: Stop from time to time to reflect on what you are learning and how you might make your group’s interactions more productive.

Celebrate Learning: Make sure you take time to enjoy one another and celebrate your learning.

Try and Apply Ideas: Commit to trying some of the ideas in your own classroom. Teaching is often enriched when we consider ways to include others’ ideas. There are many tried-and-true practices you’ll want to refine, but there are also many new ideas to implement. You might keep a list by chapter in a journal, selecting the new ones you’d like to try.



The following questions relate to the content in each chapter. These are suggestions but you will find many more concepts and ideas presented in each chapter. Enjoy!

Part One: Defining Our Teaching

Chapter 1

What Really Lies at the Heart of Comprehension

1. This chapter presents new thinking on the pillars, or components, of reading. Discuss each of them. For example, what role does background knowledge currently play in your approach to reading instruction? How do you help students gain important conceptual knowledge?
2. Are some pillars more important than others in your own teaching? Are there other pillars you might emphasize?
3. Look over the “blueprint” section entitled: “Literacy Essentials That Meet Children’s Fundamental Needs as Readers, Writers, and Thinkers.” Reflect on your own teaching in light of these essentials. Relate your own experiences to the list of essentials provided.
4. As you read the first chapter, how does the vision of comprehension—and, more broadly, K–3 literacy—mesh with your own? What ideas especially resonate with you? Is there one aspect you are especially curious about or concerned about in regard to your own students?

Chapter 2

The Text, Our Teaching—They’ve Got to Make Sense

1. Do you find yourself defaulting to “covering the curriculum”? If so, how might the “slow and steady” principle work to enrich your teaching and children’s learning?
2. Look over the goals for readers and writers. What might you add or change to reflect your own goals?



3. What thoughts do you have about the planning web as an alternative to a “to-do” list? How might this approach to planning capitalize on natural connections and make teaching more coherent and intentional?
4. We know that our beliefs and goals affect all that we do in our classrooms. Use the questions provided in the chart entitled “Some Questions to Consider as You Reflect on Your Goals” for framing a discussion with colleagues.
5. Consider the metaphor of a “menu” for balanced literacy. How does the idea of selecting each day the literacy practices we want to address help us as teachers? Does the choice scare us as teachers? Have teachers become too comfortable with a “just give me the scope and sequence” mentality that a menu approach to balanced literacy intimidates us?
6. Reflect on how the parts of balanced literacy must work together to create a meaningful whole.
7. See the examination of the principle of repetition and practice. What new thoughts does this discussion raise for you and your colleagues?
8. The term “developmentally appropriate” means different things to different people. What new or expanded ideas do you take away from this section in Chapter 2?
9. This chapter closes with the reminder that teaching needs to be joyful. Share a teaching experience when you felt joyful about your teaching and students’ learning. Reflect on the conditions that produced such joy.

Chapter 3

Time to Read: Getting Independent Reading Right

1. What does Sofia’s story teach us about reading engagement?
2. Independent reading has been a topic of discussion in recent years. As you read through the list of the benefits of independent reading, add your own reasons for making it a part of your literacy program.



3. Study and discuss the chart entitled “SSR and DEAR Time/A Re-Envisioned Independent Reading.” How does the “re-envisioned” side of the chart reflect your own practices? Are there new ones you’d like to incorporate?
4. Discuss the insights gained when I confer with students. Have you had similar experiences in conferences?
5. Compare and contrast the kindergarten and first-grade workshop schedule with the second- and third-grade schedule. In what ways do the schedules enhance and support readers?
6. Carefully read Katy’s two independent reading sessions. What do you notice that is likely to nurture students’ growth?
7. Reflect on the words: “So while at the start of this conference I thought I was going to teach Jessie something he needed to know, it ended up that first he needed to teach me about his reading preferences.” Since both student choice and their interests play critical roles in growing a reader, how can you learn more about your own students through conferring?
8. Knowing students’ developmental differences affects our teaching. Discuss the chart entitled “Some Characteristics of Readers at Different Stages of Development.”
9. This chapter encourages teachers to become “book savvy.” Becoming familiar with resources helps teachers in planning. Consider how you might work with colleagues to familiarize yourselves with the books in your school.
10. What independent reading ideas might you want to incorporate into your own teaching?
11. Reflect on the chart “Books/Students Who Might Like These Books/Other Notes.” How would this kind of planning help you better match students to books?



Chapter 4

Time to Write: Children’s Writing Nourishes Their Reading Growth

1. See the outline on what I love most about the workshop approach. Share your own list of reasons and/or the hopes you have about implementing the workshop approach in your classroom with colleagues.
2. Read over the list of recommendations from the Carnegie Corporation’s “*Writing to Read*” report. What resonates with you from your own experiences about the recommendations?
3. Read through the chart entitled “A Writer’s Job.” What do you notice that would offer readers greater insight?
4. This chapter shares an apt metaphor—backstage—in describing what children learn when they write for real purposes. How might this “backstage” knowledge nurture writers?
5. Consider the importance of choosing topics in writing. How do your own students select topics? What shifts, if any, will you make after reading this section?
6. Notice how authentic writing offers students a wide variety of audiences and purposes. Share ways to open access to your own students.
7. See the suggested writing workshop schedule. The way we allocate time matters. How does this schedule compare with your own?
8. Look through the suggested writing folder contents. What would you add or delete for your particular students?
9. Read over the chart entitled “A Writer’s Job.” Discuss how it captures the process of conception to publication. How might you share this information with your own students?



Chapter 5

Time to Talk: Giving Children the Chance to Put Words to Their Thoughts

1. Reflect on the description of a “richly colored palette” juxtaposed against “plenty of white space” for students. How does this description help us think about the way we organize time and space?
2. Discuss how to slow the pace in your own classroom to make more time for purposeful talk.
3. Both the quality and quantity of words children hear before coming to school play a role in children’s learning. Reflect on the gap among different households in your school population if applicable.
4. The chart “Freeing Up Time to Talk” includes recommendations and possibilities for dialogue. What others would you add?
5. Look over the “You’re Already Doing . . . So Instead . . .” chart. Select one you’d like to try. Commit to it and plan to share what happened when you implemented the new practice.
6. Notice the important points I make about accountability and data collection. How can you assess student learning without halting reading and writing?
7. Read over and study the list of excellent books provided that focus on the impact of language. Select one you’d like to read with colleagues. Are there others you’d recommend?
8. The I-R-E pattern (teacher **I**nitiates, student **R**esponds, teacher **E**valuates) is one of the most unproductive discourse patterns. Read over the chart “Questioning Techniques” to learn alternative ways of questioning.
9. We often wonder about the best way to teach vocabulary. What are you learning in this chapter about best practices? What new insights are you gaining?
10. The interactive read-aloud is a robust teaching framework. Look over the chart “Interactive Read-Aloud in Action” and discuss how you might implement in your classroom.



11. Study the photographs, schedules, and charts in the section “Creating an Environment to Develop Oral Language and Vocabulary.” Talk about what you notice that facilitates talk and learning.
12. Study “Ten Tips for Helping ELLs Acquire Social and Academic Vocabulary.” What practices might you try in your own classroom?

About reading the next chapters . . .

Chapters 6–9, as do Chapters 1–5, offer study groups excellent examples of tried-and-true practices. But there's more! In Chapters 6–10 you are invited to learn about and try a host of **Effective Practices** and recognize how each one sends roots wide and deep. To help name the benefits of each with greater ease, co-create anchor charts like the one shown below. Just as anchor charts help our students record their new learning, they can be useful in study group sessions too. For each **Effective Practice** in Chapters 6-10, you might consider creating an “If - Then” chart like the following example. Then compare the list on your chart against your standards document for how they match up.

Effective Practice

Learning Sight Words”

If you incorporate “learning sight words” into your own teaching, then you will be . . .

- supporting students’ deeper understanding of language
- motivating students to find and make connections among words
- helping students read with more independence
- teaching students to pay attentions to the sounds, shapes, and meanings of words
- developing a bank of sight words to help children monitor their reading and read with more fluency and comprehension

Enjoy learning together!



Part Two: Refining Our Teaching

Chapter 6

Accurate Fluent Reading: Principles and Practices

1. Read over Figure 6–1 “Phonemic Awareness Activities.” Discuss the suggested ways to build phonemic awareness. Contrast these with the less authentic ways many commercial programs suggest.
2. The power of knowing the 37 rime patterns found in Figure 6–3 is evident. Consider ways to teach these patterns to expand and strengthen students’ word knowledge.
3. How might we acquire more confidence in teaching phonics by using some of the suggestions included in this chapter?
4. Review the section on “rethinking” the way kids exchange books in their book bags. What role should we play in helping students be wise consumers?
5. Reflect on Tim Rasinski’s quote. How do the assessments we use and our teaching practices focus on fluency in the service of comprehension?
6. Look over the suggestions for reading aloud found in “Tips on Reading Aloud to Model Fluent Reading.” Are there others you would add?
7. How does a “store” of sight words support students in learning to read?
8. See the discussion that “through ‘whole-to-part’ activities” students add sight words to their automatic vocabulary. Share your own experiences in teaching students sight words.
9. Review and discuss the “Look, Say, Cover, Write, Check” procedure. What do you notice? How might you incorporate this in your own teaching?
10. One of the best explanations of dysfluency in readers is reading a book that is too difficult. Discuss your experiences with students who are dysfluent. What factors, such as text difficulty, might have played a role?



11. See the discussion on “Letter and Sound Searches.” How might these searches strengthen your students’ reading?
12. Some ways to increase fluency and comprehension are outlined in this chapter. Discuss them in light of your own experiences and how you might use them in your own teaching.
13. Reader’s Theater is a robust practice. Discuss ways you have or would like to implement it to support your students’ comprehension and fluency.

Chapter 7

Background Knowledge: Principles and Practices

1. Read over the definitions of prior knowledge and background knowledge. Discuss how each plays a role in your own students’ reading.
2. Since reading itself builds background knowledge, how can you use the suggestions provided to enhance your students’ background knowledge?
3. Because inferring requires students to fill gaps in the text with information from their own background, how might you increase students’ potential through the suggestions given on teaching inferring?
4. This chapter includes a comprehensive discussion of “companion texts.” How do you see this idea as outlined supporting your students as readers?
5. Clustering texts on the same topic takes advantage of content and concept connections. Discuss how offering students multiple opportunities to read about these similar concepts, ideas, and vocabulary might add breadth and depth to students’ thinking about text organization, text features, and concepts. How might clustering texts scaffold students’ comprehension and vocabulary knowledge?
6. Students who find reading challenging often struggle with the plethora of ideas in texts. See the idea of using synopsis texts to help readers conceptualize the big ideas. Discuss how this procedure might support your students.



7. Literacy centers are ubiquitous in classrooms. Read back through the description for ways to use content-area literacy centers. What might you want to implement in your own classroom?
8. How can you incorporate more periodical texts like those listed in the chart entitled “Magazines That Include a Variety of Genre on a Topic” in your classroom?

Chapter 8

Oral Language and Vocabulary: Principles and Practices

1. Consider the powerful ideas of Lev Vygotsky. How can you ensure students will use language as a tool for learning by helping shape and define concepts?
2. Look over your own classroom when the students have gone. What do you notice about the environment that supports students’ oral language and vocabulary development?
3. How can we increase student success by becoming more explicit in our teaching language?
4. Reread the chart on “Say More.” How might using this strategy foster richer discussions among students and invite more elaboration?
5. See the suggestions for ways to make “Think-Turn-Talk” more effective. Discuss your own experiences as well as ways this might enrich classroom discussion.
6. Wordless books hold great promise in fostering language and reading development. Discuss some of the ways highlighted here to use the many types of wordless books. What titles might you add from your own library to the list included in the chapter?
7. This chapter shows multiple ways to incorporate the use of alphabet books in our teaching. How might you use them to investigate text organization, build constellations of concepts and vocabulary, and learn more about language?
8. “Words Words Words” is a six-step procedure. How might you integrate it into your own teaching to develop students’ vocabulary, support comprehension, increase “word awareness,” and attend to multiple-meaning words and word parts?



Chapter 9

Reading-Writing Connections: Principles and Practices

1. Consider how systematic teaching and intentionality creates rich opportunities for maximizing the reading-writing connection. How might you incorporate the principles outlined here into your own planning and teaching?
2. Study the chart entitled “What *Writers* Do/What *Readers* Do.” What do you notice about the similarity and reciprocity in the two processes?
3. How might you encourage children to use drawing to express themselves and enrich the meaning of texts they’ve written?
4. Visual representations fill our world. Consider the suggestions in the chart entitled “Visual Literacy Reading Strategies.” Select one or more to incorporate into your own teaching.
5. Helping students see reading as a problem-solving process is often challenging. The “If . . . Then . . .” scenarios increase students’ facility as they become more strategic. What other scenarios might you consider?
6. What new thinking does the section on inferring open for you?
7. How might you use content-area notebooks in your own classroom to expand and extend students’ learning?
8. Personalized editing lists increase students’ awareness of the important role editing plays in our writing for others and as a tool for making meaning. As you read through the suggestions in this chapter, what benefits do you see for students?
9. See the section on using an Idea Book as an alternative to writer’s notebook for K–3 students. What advantages do you see in using the Idea Book for younger students?
10. How might you use Ta-Da Publishing Books in your classroom? Are there genres you would add?
11. Look over the chart entitled “The First Few Weeks of the Writing Workshop.” How might this outline serve as a road map in your own classroom?



Chapter 10

Repertoire of Strategies: Teach in a Simplified, Sensible Way

1. Discuss the section labeled “Differentiating Between Skills and Strategies.” What is new or noteworthy in this section?
2. Review the following six essential strategies for reading comprehension. How would your list compare?
 - ✦ Set a purpose for reading.
 - ✦ Access and use prior knowledge.
 - ✦ Consider text structure.
 - ✦ Ask questions and wonder.
 - ✦ Visualize to experience.
 - ✦ Summarize to determine importance.
3. The “three-faceted approach” is one that includes calibrating over the larger system and focuses on aligning teaching and learning across a system. How might you work with colleagues in your own school or district to increase coherence and enhance student success?
4. Discuss the shift suggested in comprehension study as students move through the grades. What do you notice that you might incorporate in your own school to deepen students’ growing understanding and use of comprehension strategies?
5. This chapter suggests incorporating strategy sheets into our teaching. Review the chart titled “Strategy Sheet Do’s and Don’ts.” Look at the ones suggested. Are there others you would add?
6. How does the concept of a “teacher-tailored guided reading collection” provide greater access to the necessary materials for teaching a specific grade level? What are your thoughts about creating your own collection?
7. What are your thoughts about the guided reading sheet? How might it serve as a scaffold for us as teachers?
8. See the outline for the three facets of guided reading. Discuss why it recommends “focusing first and primarily on ideas and information” before addressing word work. What message might that priority send our students about reading?



7. Adding a “Putting Our Strategies to Work” board in our classrooms could play a pivotal role in helping our students notice and name what strategies they are using and how that use supports their comprehension. The practice might also serve as a “window” to look through to “see” students’ developing understanding. Discuss how you might use this to foster student learning *and* offer useful assessment data.

Reflect on all you’ve learned from this book. Make a commitment to try and apply new practices. As we incorporate new ideas in our classrooms, it is smart to draw on the support of colleagues. Just as you studied the idea’s presented in this book as a group, now commit to studying your own classrooms as those ideas take root in your schools.

Happy learning!