***“Do You Understand?”***

Reading comprehension in the lower grades

**What is reading comprehension?** The purpose of reading is to gather information and insights from a text. Reading comprehension occurs when student can not only say the words (decode), but also understand the information in the text.

**Reading Comprehension Skills** Students with good reading comprehension will be able to answer the following questions about a text:

* Summarize: re-tell in a shorter from; understand the overall story.
* Explain: interpret; paraphrase; retell story in their own words
* Describe: describe specific details in the story: setting, characters
* State Main Ideas: give a title, give each section of the story subheadings
* Classify: put characters from the story into groups
* Sequence: understand the timeline of events
* Compare and contrast: look at characteristics of characters and explain how they are similar or different
* Visualize: see characters or setting in one’s minds
* Cause and Effect: understand motives and effects of motives: What led to this?
* Infer (i.e. read between the lines): find evidence in the story that supports a conclusion not spelled out in the story
* Distinguish fact from opinion: observable facts versus subjective opinion (opinions can be reasonably disagreed with)
* Generalize: draw general conclusions from the text
* Evaluate: determine whether the actions of the characters are right or wrong using standards we know to be true (e.g. the Bible)

**Decoding and Fluency**

Before students can comprehend the meaning of text, they must *decode* from symbols to understandable words. Then they must translate the words into meaning.

Students must also achieve *fluency* in reading text at their grade level. If they struggle to quickly and automatically read, the meaning of the text will be obscured.

**Why Do Students Struggle to Comprehend?**

* **Difficulty with decoding and fluency**: Students will struggle to comprehend a text if they cannot decode the words or if they cannot read fluently. If students are using all their concentration simply to read the words, they will not have any brain power left over to understand the information in the text.
* **Reading too rapidly**: Students who have good fluency may read so fast they miss details and other information.
* **Lack of background knowledge**: Students flounder because they have no “hooks” to grab the material or to make them care about it.
* **Poor attention span**: Students are unwilling or unable to pay attention.
* **Poor reading strategies**: Students don’t use reading strategies that good readers often use unconsciously.

**Reading Strategies**

Good readers use these strategies to understand the information in a text and to remember it. Some students learn these strategies without being taught, while others need specific instruction on how to use them.

* **Previewing**: Previewing the story before reading allows the reader to gather background information and context.
  + What does the title of the story tell us?
  + What can we learn by looking at the cover of the book or other artwork?
  + Discuss the background of the story if the setting is unfamiliar to your students.
* **Questioning**: Questioning give the reader a purpose for reading. “What questions do you want answered?”
  + Ask students what they want to learn from the story.
  + Teach students to *wonder* about the text.
  + Ask students questions that the story can then answer for them. They will begin reading the story with a purpose for reading.
* **Predicting**: Making predictions about what will happen in a story will make readers pay more attention to see if their predictions are correct.
  + Before they read the story, ask students to predict what might happen during the story.
  + After the story, ask them if their predictions were correct.
* **Visualizing**: Visualizing the characters and setting in a story brings the story to life. It seems more real, and will be understood better, if it is visualized.
  + Teach students to visualize what is happening in the story.
  + Ask students what they think a character or setting looks like.
* **Relating material to prior knowledge**: Connecting what a reader does know with what he doesn’t know helps him to better understand what he is reading.
  + Help students make connections with what they already know.
  + Have students ask themselves questions. “Does this story remind me of anything that happened to me or someone I know?” “Have I learned about this in school?”
* **Summarizing**: When someone summarizes, they find the main point.
  + Teach students to summarize what happened.
  + Ask students to tell the story in their own words.
* **Sequencing**: Arranging details or events in the correct order such as chronological, cause-and-effect, etc. Knowing how parts of a story relate to each other help to make it more understandable.
  + Ask students to tell you when different events occurred in the story.
  + Ask them what the effect of a character’s action was or which action caused a certain effect.
* **Inferring**: Good readers can read between the lines to find information that is not clearly written in the text.
  + Ask the students questions that require them to infer meaning from the text.
  + Have students justify their answers. Although the answer shouldn’t be one that the student can point to, their answers should make sense and have something to back them up.
* **Monitoring understanding**: Good readers know when they are not understanding a text and will reread a difficult sentence or paragraph.
  + Teach students to think about whether they are comprehending a section of text.
  + Teach them to be willing to reread it or slow down their reading if they don’t understand it.
  + Have students ask questions about what they don’t understand in a story. Model this behavior to students so they know how to do it.

**How Can You Improve Reading Comprehension?**

**Model reading strategies**

* Read your students a story or text while thinking aloud and using reading strategies. “I don’t understand what this sentence is saying, Maybe I should back up and reread this whole paragraph again.” By modeling these reading strategies, you are showing your students what good readers do.
* The teacher can model “think-alouds” alone, or students can join in or help each other when reading in small groups.
* When modeling a reading strategy, tell the students which one you are using and explain why the strategy is helpful for readers. Explain when to use different strategies. (e.g. Use *Previewing* and *Questioning* before reading the text, use *Monitoring* understanding while reading, and use *Summarizing and Sequencing* after reading.)
* You can use the same text multiple times to model different strategies. This way the students will be more comfortable with the text and won’t struggle as much with decoding and fluency. They can then focus more on the strategy.
* It is better to focus on one or two strategies at a time than it is to overload the students by doing several at once.

**Give students background information**

* Explain any background information needed for students to better understand what they are going to read. Is it a period of history that is unfamiliar to them? Or an area of the world they don’t know much about? This background information will help students better understand the new information they are about to read.
* Preview definitions and explanations for any important terms or words in the story or text. This will decrease the chance that the students will be tripped up by unfamiliar terminology or vocabulary.
* Help students better understand the background by using pictures or illustrations. Perhaps the people in the story have unfamiliar clothing or live in different houses.
* Expanding your students’ horizons will help them understand a wider variety of situations.
  + Read them stories from many different areas and experiences.
  + Have students read as much as possible.

**Ask comprehension questions**

* The goal of any questions you have your students answer is to help them engage with the text and teach them reading comprehension.
* Once your students have read the story or text, ask them a variety of questions about what they just read. Ask some simple, factual questions, and some that are more subjective.
* Ask questions that require students to use the Reading Comprehension Skills listed on page 1 of this handout.
* Give some simple questions for the students to answer even before they begin reading. This will help them to focus their reading and have them looking for important information as they read.

**General Advice for Improving Students’ Reading Comprehension**

* Have students construct grammatical sentences using sets of words from the text that explain something from the text. (e.g. the parable of the Good Samaritan)

*Priest/Levite Levite/passed by Samaritan/compassion*

* Help students improve their fluency by having them read easier books with good comprehension before moving them to more difficult books.
  + Research shows that students also benefit from tackling more difficult texts with the teacher modeling good reading strategies and prompting students to use them as well.
* Build time for independent, silent reading into the schedule of the day.
* Have as many books as possible in the classroom or regularly visit the school library so that students have plenty of opportunity to read.

**The Golden Windows**

By Laura Richards (1850-1943)

All day long the little boy had worked hard, in field and barn and shed, for his people were poor farmers, and could not pay a workman; but at sunset there came an hour that was all his own, for his father had given it to him. Then the boy would go up to the top of a hill and look across at another hill that rose some miles away. On this far hill stood a house with windows of clear gold and diamonds. They shone and blazed so that it made the boy wink to look at them: but after a while the people in the house put up shutters, as it seemed, and then it looked like any common farm house. The boy supposed they did this because it was supper-time; and then he would go into the house and have his supper of bread and milk, and so to bed.

One day the boy's father called him and said: "You have been a good boy, and have earned a holiday. Take this day for your own; but remember that God gave it, and try to learn some good thing."

The boy thanked his father and kissed his mother; then he put a piece of bread in his pocket, and started off to find the house with the golden windows.

It was pleasant walking. His bare feet made marks in the white dust, and when he looked back, the footprints seemed to be following him, and making company for him. His shadow, too, kept beside him, and would dance or run with him as he pleased; so it was very cheerful.

By and by he felt hungry; and he sat down by a brown brook that ran through the alder hedge by the roadside, and ate his bread, and drank the clear water. Then he scattered the crumbs for the birds, as his mother had taught him to do, and went on his way.

After a long time he came to a high green hill; and when he had climbed the hill, there was the house on the top; but it seemed that the shutters were up, for he could not see the golden windows. He came up to the house, and then he could well have wept, for the windows were of clear glass, like any others, and there was no gold anywhere about them.

A woman came to the door, and looked kindly at the boy, and asked him what he wanted.

"I saw the golden windows from our hilltop," he said, "and I came to see them, but now they are only glass."

The woman shook her head and laughed.

"We are poor farming people," she said, "and are not likely to have gold about our windows; but glass is better to see through." She bade the boy sit down on the broad stone step at the door, and brought him a cup of milk and a cake, and bade him rest; then she called her daughter, a child of his own age, and nodded kindly at the two, and went back to her work.

The little girl was barefooted like himself, and wore a brown cotton gown, but her hair was golden like the windows he had seen, and her eyes were blue like the sky at noon. She led the boy about the farm, and showed him her black calf with the white star on its forehead, and he told her about his own at home, which was red like a chestnut, with four white feet. Then when they had eaten an apple together, and so had become friends, the boy asked her about the golden windows. The little girl nodded, and said she knew all about them, only he had mistaken the house.

"You have come quite the wrong way!" she said. "Come with me, and I will show you the house with the golden windows, and then you will see for yourself."

They went to a knoll that rose behind the farmhouse, and as they went the little girl told him that the golden windows could only be seen at a certain hour, about sunset.

"Yes, I know that!" said the boy.

When they reached the top of the knoll, the girl turned and pointed; and there on a hill far away stood a house with windows of clear gold and diamond, just as he had seen them. And when they looked again, the boy saw that it was his own home.

Then he told the little girl that he must go; and he gave her his best pebble, the white one with the red band, that he had carried for a year in his pocket; and she gave him three horse-chestnuts, one red like satin, one spotted, and one white like milk. He promised to come again, but he did not tell her what he had learned; and so he went back down the hill, and the little girl stood in the sunset light and watched him.

The way home was long, and it was dark before the boy reached his father's house; but the lamplight and firelight shone through the windows, making them almost as bright as he had seen them from the hilltop; and when he opened the door, his mother came to kiss him, and his little sister ran to throw her arms about his neck, and his father looked up and smiled from his seat by the fire.

"Have you had a good day?" asked his mother.

Yes, the boy had had a very good day.

"And have you learned anything?" asked his father.

"Yes!" said the boy. "I have learned that our house has windows of gold and diamond."

**Sample Comprehension Questions for “The Golden Windows”**

**A letter signifies which type of question each question is.**

**D = literal details I = inferential information SI = significant insight A =application to our lives**

**Answer these questions.**

1. D When was the boy allowed to do what he wanted?

2. D What did he do in his special time?

3. D What trouble did the boy have in looking at the windows?

4. D What was the boy’s explanation for why they put up the shutters?

5. D What house did the girl point out to the boy near the time of sunset?

6. I Name some jobs you think the boy did every day.

7. I If the boy’s parents had more money, what would they have done?

8. I What had the boy’s mother taught him about treatment of wild animals?

9. I Why did the boy feel almost like weeping when he saw the glass windows?

10. I Why do you suppose the boy and girl enjoyed telling each other about their calves?

11. I Did the girl know whose house she was pointing out to the boy?

12. I Why do you suppose the boy gave away his “best pebble”?

13. I The little boy did not “tell the girl what he had learned.” What did he not tell her?

14. SI Based on this story, do our “everyday homes seem more special when seen from far away?

15. SI How does this story make the lives of these common people seem special?

16. SI Did the boy tell a lie to his father at the end of the story?

17. A Do you have a “hill” where you like to sit?

18. A What are some other types of “hills” people might have?

19. A Does your house have golden windows?

**Beside each main idea, write the first word of the paragraph that includes it.**

20. \_\_\_\_ Father gave the boy a day off.

21. \_\_\_\_ The boy tells his parents that he has learned something that day.

22. \_\_\_\_ The boy enjoyed his walk to the distant house.

**Answer this question.**

23. What would be another good title for this story?