

Comprehension/Knowledge Building, Grade 4-6

Introduction

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Good readers read with fluency. They move smoothly through texts of varying complexity, effortlessly and accurately translating sound/spellings into words and linking words with their meanings. But good readers do more than read words. They understand that the words they read work together to create meaning—that is, they read with comprehension. Good readers:

- Are strategic readers who consciously prepare for what they are about to read, make connections between new knowledge and what they already know, think about what they read, and reevaluate as they read.
- Use specific reading strategies to help them understand texts of all kinds including literature, poetry, and informational text.
- Learn to apply strategies and skills to get meaning from a variety of text types and to expand their knowledge base.

In this course, Nora Zamora guides her fourth-grade students as they use the skills and strategies necessary for comprehension and knowledge building. She continually encourages the students to take responsibility for their own learning and to stretch their abilities by preparing, questioning, and interacting with the text.

Teaching Example 1

In Teaching Example 1, Ms. Zamora makes sure the students are ready to read a new selection by actively engaging them in several prereading activities. These activities are designed to help the students activate and use the knowledge they already have, supply them with knowledge that they need, and familiarize them with the text.

Although this is a complex text, the students are comfortable; they know that support is always available, if they need it.

In preparation for reading a text, Ms. Zamora's class discusses specific topics designed to help them approach the text confidently. Before reading the text, Ms. Zamora helps the students:

- Build background knowledge through collaborative discussion of text types and historical events surrounding the piece.
- Discuss what they already know of the subject. In doing so, she helps them activate their prior knowledge while also building their speaking and listening skills. Note that Ms. Zamora specifically asks them to consider the Concept/Question Board, which they have been working with throughout the unit on Survival. This helps students recognize that their growing knowledge of Survival can serve as background knowledge for understanding this new selection. Eventually, this becomes second nature.
- Focus their browsing of the selection as they look for clues that will help them understand it, words or ideas that might be confusing, and things that make them wonder. These lists will be revisited during and after the reading.
- Set their own purposes for reading.

All of these activities help the students become engaged readers who know, before they begin to read, what their purpose is for reading and what they expect to learn.

Prereading

Good readers rarely dive into a text unprepared. They have an idea of what they want or need to learn from the text. They know why they are reading—to learn, for enjoyment, and to find answers to their questions. They have an idea of what to expect, and they think about what they already know. At every step, good readers make connections between what they are reading and what they already know. These connections may be made on several different levels at the same time. Good readers may establish a connection between, for example, the text they are reading and their familiarity with the subject of the text, the type of writing, or knowledge of the author's other work.

Teaching Example 2

Teaching Example 2 demonstrates two critical steps in preparing to read a new selection and in building comprehension—vocabulary building and a collaborative discussion of comprehension strategies. Ms. Zamora assures the students' success in building vocabulary and reading the selection by helping them understand the different ways in which they can learn new words and by continually reviewing the comprehension strategies that good readers use.

Introducing Vocabulary

Students are taught to decipher the meaning of new words by using these three main skills: word structure, apposition, and context.

Word Structure:	Students learn to look for prefixes, suffixes, base words, and inflectional endings.
Apposition:	Definitions are often given for words in text that the author thinks might be misunderstood. Students are taught to look for such help in their reading.
Context:	Context can provide clues to meaning. The students are taught not to look only at the words immediately surrounding an unknown word, but to go back in the text to see if there is anything that will help them understand a word.

Finally, the students check their understanding of new words by looking them up in the glossary of their *Anthology*. In this way, they can see how well the different skills worked in clarifying the unknown words.

Introducing Comprehension Strategies

Effective readers are strategic readers. They have tools or strategies that they use to help them understand text as they read. The comprehension strategies taught in *Open Court Reading* and *SRA Imagine It!* include:

- Asking questions
- Making predictions
- Confirming predictions
- Making connections
- Monitoring and clarifying

- Monitoring and adjusting reading speed
- Summarizing
- Visualizing

Teaching Example 3

In Teaching Example 3, Ms. Zamora and the students read the selection, engaging in strategic reading. The students are comfortable using comprehension strategies because in the first half of the year, Ms. Zamora spent a lot of time modeling them. She still models strategies, but encourages students to use these strategies on their own by prompting them.

Using Comprehension Strategies

In this particular lesson, Ms. Zamora and her class will be concentrating on four of these strategies: asking questions, monitoring and clarifying, making connections, and summarizing. By helping the students use these strategies independently, Ms. Zamora helps assure their continued success as readers and learners. Although the class will pay particular attention to four of the strategies, they are free to use any of the reading strategies that they feel will be of help.

Teaching Example 4

In Teaching Example 4, Ms. Zamora and the class continue reading the selection. As they read, they continue to use reading strategies.

Using Comprehension Strategies, cont.

Ms. Zamora reminds the students to use reading strategies as they read. In addition, the students occasionally return to the clues, problems, and wonderings discussed before reading that are listed on the board.

When the reading is complete, the students discuss their strategy use and once again return to the clues, problems, and wonderings in order to confirm any predictions they had made, solve problems they raised, and answer questions they listed.

Teaching Example 5

In Teaching Example 5, Ms. Zamora follows up the reading of the selection with a collaborative discussion of what has been read. This discussion gives the students the opportunity to discuss their reactions, clarify their understanding, and make connections to other literature and their lives. In addition, it helps those students who may have had difficulty by engaging them in dialogue with their peers. This gives her the opportunity to informally assess the students' understanding.

Discussing the Selection

Collaborative discussion is a vital part of the comprehension process. Students share their thoughts including any confusion they may have had while reading the selection.

As the students talk, they go beyond the selection at hand and make connections to the other selections they have read about survival. This is an important step in knowledge building—the ability to integrate information from various sources into a coherent body of knowledge.

The students use a routine called "handing-off" to keep the discussion going. Handing-off turns the responsibility for the discussion over to the class. Ms. Zamora becomes a member of the group rather than the controller of the group. As a member of the group, however, she takes the opportunity to help facilitate and direct the discussion when necessary.

Please note: Ms. Zamora is a fourth grade teacher and therefore, is using Level 4 of *Open Court Reading*. Although the content is different, the instructional methods learned in this course can be easily applied to lessons in Levels 5-6.