READING COMPREHENSION

# What is reading comprehension and why is it important?

“Real reading has to do with thinking, learning, and expanding a reader’s knowledge and horizons. It has to do with building on past knowledge, mastering new information, and connecting with the minds of those you’ve never met.”

Reading comprehension is the ability to read text, process it and understand its meaning. It relies on two, interconnected abilities: word reading (being able to decode the symbols on the page) and language comprehension (being able to understand the meaning of the words and sentences).

When we make sense of a text, however, we don’t just remember the exact words and phrases we read. Rather, we form a mental model of what the text describes by integrating the sense of the words and sentences into a meaningful whole, like a film that plays in our head.

Good comprehension is vital if reading is to have a purpose, if a reader is to engage with and learn from a text and, ultimately, if a reader is to enjoy what they’re reading.

# How is word reading related to reading comprehension?

Reading is the product of two components: word recognition and language comprehension. Both are essential for reading comprehension to occur.

Good comprehenders can decode printed words accurately, efficiently and fluently. Children who struggle with word reading, however, will read the text more slowly and may not be able to accurately decode all of the important words. This can lead to significant deficits in reading comprehension. Strong word reading therefore makes a vital contribution to the ease and quality of a child’s reading comprehension.

# What are some of the challenges to good reading comprehension?

Specific difficulties with reading comprehension can arise for different reasons, and these can vary from child to child.

When children first learn to read, they are still developing their basic word reading skills. As a result, their skill in word recognition is the major determinant of how good they are at reading comprehension. As their word reading becomes more fluent, their language comprehension becomes the key factor in reading comprehension.

Some children may have poor reading comprehension because their word reading is slow or inaccurate. Other children can develop good word reading skills, but experience reading comprehension problems because of less-developed language skills. Children learning English as an additional language can actually do very well on word reading. However, their knowledge of the meanings of words and idioms and, for some children who have recently arrived in the country, their limited cultural experience of life in the UK can restrict their background knowledge, affecting their comprehension.

# Why is vocabulary development important for comprehension?

The relationship between vocabulary and reading comprehension is two-way: they support each other. One reason for this strong relationship is that rich knowledge of word meanings enables readers and listeners to make inferences and thematic links within a text. Put simply, the greater a person’s knowledge of words and their meaning, the easier they will find it to understand even complex texts.

While being familiar with a large number of words is important, the depth of a person’s vocabulary is also important – how well they can use their knowledge of the word and its related words in order to understand what they are reading.

The range of language used in written text means that reading is a good way of expanding vocabulary knowledge, because written text contains rarer, less familiar words than conversation does. All children, even those who can decode fluently, benefit from being read aloud to as it provides access to these less familiar words, as well as providing a model for fluent reading and pronunciation.

# What are the factors associated with good comprehension?

* Good comprehension requires a range of different knowledge and skills:
* vocabulary and background knowledge
* integration and inference skills
* understanding language structure/connections
* knowledge and use of text structure
* comprehension monitoring.

Each of these works together with the others to help a reader to make sense of what they read.

# Does the amount of time children spend reading have an impact on their comprehension skills?

Yes. A large-scale statistical review of 99 different research studies found that the amount of leisure time children spent reading or being read to is a powerful predictor of comprehension (and other critical literacy skills such as word recognition, spelling, and vocabulary skills). Reading to young children and helping them to develop positive attitudes to reading can develop a habit that will enable them to develop literacy-related skills and to acquire knowledge throughout their lifetime.