

Reading Strategy: Choosing a Just Right Book

Choosing your own books makes you a better reader.¹

What is this? Choosing a “just right” book is a phrase that educators use to encourage students to choose a book that is not too hard, not too easy, but just right for the child’s reading level. The more just right books a child reads, the better reader he or she will become. Think of the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears. Goldilocks chooses the porridge, chair, and bed just right for her. The same process takes place when choosing books (without the bears coming home at the end!). It is important that students learn the process of choosing a book that is just right for them, because as they grow and learn their just right books will change.

When do we do this as adults? As adults, we have a pretty good idea of our own reading level, which includes our attention span, our interests, and our willingness to commit to a book or whatever is being read. Over the years as readers, we have fine-tuned the ability to assess a piece of text and determine if it is worth reading. In fact, it only takes us a few seconds sometimes to decide whether we are going to read a book, an article, a website, or anything else we see. Children are still in the beginning stages of developing this important skill. By modeling the thought process with your children, you can help them shape their ability to choose a just right book.

What does this look like for children? Children are encouraged to choose books that they will be able to read while also being challenged. Primary students who are just beginning to read can get distracted by big words that need to be decoded or sounded out. Students can use the font size, number of words on a page, and the pictures to help them determine if the book is just right. For intermediate readers, the Five Finger Rule can be used to assess if a book is right for them. Here is how it works: Find a book that looks interesting, Read the title and author, Read the back and/or flap, Flip through the book, Read the first page while holding up one hand. Each time you come to a word you don’t know, put up one finger. If at the end of the page you have 0-1 fingers up, it’s too easy; 2-3 fingers, it’s just right; 4-5 fingers, it’s probably too hard.

What do I say to my child to make the most of this reading strategy?

- Why did you choose that book? What looked interesting about it? How does this book compare to other books you’ve read?
- Did you use the Five Finger Rule? How many fingers did you hold up while reading the first page? Do you feel like this book is just right for you? Why?
- What do you do if a book is too hard for you? How do you figure out words in the book that you don’t know? What is a new word that you’ve learned in this book? Can you use it in a sentence?

¹ Lu, Y. L., & Gordon, C. (2008). The effects of free choice on student learning: A study of summer reading. *School Libraries Worldwide* 14(1), 38-55.

Reading Strategy: Creating Mental Images

Mental images bring forth not only still snapshots of reading, but smells, tastes, feelings, and chills and thrills as well.¹

What is this? When we read books without pictures, we often make pictures in our mind to better understand the story. Mental images help readers follow the story while reading. When children (and adults) create mental images in their heads while reading, they are more likely to comprehend and remember the story after they finish it. Creating mental images is also closely connected to building background knowledge. Reading creates opportunities to learn about new things, and creating mental images while reading helps that new knowledge stick. The authors of the book *7 Keys to Comprehension* write that "sensory images are the cinema unfolding in your mind that makes reading three-dimensional."²

When do we do this as adults? Have you ever seen a movie after you've read a book and said afterwards that the actors were not who you pictured in your head? As adults we often automatically create sensory images without even thinking. When we read an article in a newspaper about politics, a different country, or even a recipe, we are able to picture the person, place, or ingredients in our head. When we do this we better understand what we are reading and often remember it for a longer period of time. Kids are still learning how to do this, and adults need to model this skill for them. While reading, do think-alouds with your children and tell them what you see in your head while you are reading. Take turns reading pages, or paragraphs, in a book and stop periodically to talk about what the pictures in your head look like. The great thing is that both you and your child will see different images, but both of you will be right! There are no wrong answers when creating mental images.

What does this look like for children? Children are regularly bombarded with images from television, video games, and computers, resulting in an overload of visual representations that are created for them as opposed to by them. When children have the skills to create mental images in their heads, they will have a better understanding of the entire story and be able to make predictions and form judgments about the text.

What do I say to my child to make the most of this reading strategy?

- What does the main character look like to you? Draw him or her for me.
- What do you see when you read? How do those pictures help you understand the story?
- How can you compare the characters in this book to another book you've read? How are your mental images different? How are they the same?

^{1,2} Zimmermann, Susan, and Chryse Hutchins. *7 Keys to Comprehension: How to Help Your Kids Read It and Get It!* New York: Three Rivers, 2003.

Reading Strategy: Building Background Knowledge

The very act of living adds to your background knowledge.¹

What is this? Each day our experiences, what we read, our conversations with others, the music we listen to, our hobbies, our relationships, and the places we go (such as summer vacation) add to our background knowledge. This background knowledge creates a lens we look through while reading. Questioning what you read activates that background knowledge and builds new knowledge. Susan Zimmermann and Chryse Hutchins, the authors of [7 Keys to Comprehension: How to Help Your Kids Read It and Get It](#), write that “background knowledge is like Velcro. It helps new information *adhere*. The more background knowledge you can develop and use, the more you can make sense of and remember new information.”²

When do we do this as adults? After reading an article, a book, or hearing a news story our minds begin making connections to other pieces on the same topic, or our minds may begin to ask questions if the topic is new or unfamiliar. By connecting new information to existing knowledge, we make sense of what we are reading or learning. Talking with others about what we read also builds background knowledge. Have you ever read something and talked about it with someone else only to discover he or she had interpreted it a different way? We each bring our own experiences into our background knowledge. Talking with your child about this process is vitally important. By helping your child question and connect new information to his or her background knowledge, your child will create a foundation to be an attentive and engaged reader.

What does this look like for children? Have you ever heard your child ask multiple questions in a row? Why is the sky blue? Why is the grass green? Why do we [fill in the blank]? Children are in the formative stages of building their background knowledge. By asking questions it means they are tuned into the world around them and using what they already know to create new connections. While reading, encourage your child to stop and ask questions about the story. If something in the plot or setting is unclear, help your child find resources to answer those questions. Background knowledge helps readers get into longer books that may be challenging otherwise. Encourage your child to use sticky notes to mark places where he or she made connections or had questions in the book. Go through the book with your child and talk about those places marked.

What do I say to my child to make the most of this reading strategy?

- How does this book compare to other books you’ve read? How is it different? Why is it important to read different types of books?
- As you read this book, or chapter, or page, did anything remind you of your own experiences or life?
- How does your background knowledge help you predict what will happen next in the story?
- What do you notice about how our background knowledge creates mental images as we read?³

^{1,2,3} Zimmermann, Susan, and Chryse Hutchins. *7 Keys to Comprehension: How to Help Your Kids Read It and Get It!* New York: Three Rivers, 2003.

Reading Strategy: Making Inferences

Inferring while reading creates a sense of ownership with the text.¹

What is this? To infer is to deduce or conclude (information) from evidence and reasoning rather than from explicit statements. Susan Zimmermann and Chryse Hutchins, the authors of *7 Keys to Comprehension: How to Help Your Kids Read It and Get It*, write that “inferring involves forming a best guess about what the ‘evidence’ (words, sentences, and paragraphs) means; speculating about what’s to come; and then drawing conclusions about what was read to deepen the meaning of the literal words on the page.”²

When do we do this as adults? As adults we make inferences all the time. We infer while doing everyday tasks like choosing the fastest grocery or bank line, while having conversations with colleagues, or while watching a TV show or movie. We infer or make a prediction about what will happen next. We also infer while reading. Making an inference about something requires using background knowledge, asking questions about what the author is presenting, and utilizing the mental images created by the text. The dialogue in our heads comes naturally after many years of reading. Children are still developing this inner monologue that connects them to what they are reading. By voicing what is happening in your head while reading, children can learn from your example as they continue to grow as readers.

What does this look like for children? It takes background knowledge and text evidence (words, sentences, and paragraphs) to make an inference. As children learn to become better readers, they must feel a connection to the text and be excited to read. By asking questions about the title, the cover, the first chapter, the characters, the plot, etc., children become engaged in the book they are reading. Children need to be able to read more than just the words – they need to interact with the story. That’s what inferencing does. Model this with your child by taking turns talking out loud about a book, chapter, article, or even a work of art. When authors write stories, they leave clues for the reader to find and put together. Ask your child what clues the author has left for him or her. As mentioned above, inferring is an everyday skill that can easily be translated to reading from real life. Readers who infer while reading will have better comprehension and gain more from the text. For fun, play games like 20 Questions, Charades, and Pictionary where inferencing is embedded within the strategy of the game.

What do I say to my child to make the most of this reading strategy?

- What predictions can you make about the story based on the title and cover of the book?
- Why do you think the character did or said that?
- What do you think will happen next in the story?
- What clues helped you understand the characters’ actions?
- Have you confirmed an earlier prediction while reading the book?
- How does inferring or predicting help you understand the story and what you are reading?

^{1,2} Zimmermann, Susan, and Chryse Hutchins. *7 Keys to Comprehension: How to Help Your Kids Read It and Get It!* New York: Three Rivers, 2003.

Reading Strategy: Asking Questions

Readers purposefully and spontaneously ask questions before, during, and after reading.¹

What is this? Readers ask question to figure out the meaning, to preview what is about to be read (and if it is worth reading), to determine the format, to help follow the plot, and to answer previously asked questions. Questions can be asked in a variety of ways before, during, after, and well after reading. Proficient readers decide whether the questions they ask can be answered by the text or if they have to go outside the text for an answer.

When do we do this as adults? Adults can relate to having an internal dialogue that is constantly questioning the surroundings, the people, and the happenings around them. To apply this to reading, that internal dialogue helps drive you through a book. “Why did that happen?”, “What is going to happen next?”, and “How will that be resolved?” Or, “If this is true, what does that mean?”, “How does that fit together?”, and “How did that come to be?” Debbie Miller, educator and author of the book Reading With Meaning, writes, “Thoughtful readers know how intriguing it is to take the time to speculate about these kinds of questions and create their own unique explanations, or interpretations.”²

What does this look like for children? Children are full of questions. When these questions are vocalized and talked about while reading, a valuable learning experience takes place and readers reach a deeper comprehension of the text. Hearing other questions being asked and answered helps children understand the process of questioning. It is important to remember that there are no wrong questions – all questions, at all times are welcome while reading.

What do I say to my child to make the most of this reading strategy?

- Before Reading
 - What do you think will happen in this book? Why?
 - What does the cover tell us about this book? What does the title tell us?
- During Reading
 - I wonder about this character. Why do you think he/she is this way?
 - What mental images do you see while reading this story?
 - What do you infer will happen next in the story?
 - What new questions do you have since you started reading?
- After Reading
 - Which questions you had at the beginning of the story were answered? Which ones were not?
 - How would you summarize this story? How would you compare it to other stories?
- Why do you think readers ask questions before, during, and after reading? How does asking questions make you a better reader?³

^{1,2,3} Miller, Debbie. *Reading with Meaning: Teaching Comprehension in the Primary Grades*. Portland, ME.: Stenhouse, 2002

Reading Strategy: Determining Importance

Knowing your purpose for reading helps determine what's important.¹

What is this? In the midst of an overabundance of information everywhere we look, the ability to determine the importance of what you're reading is necessary and saves time in the long run. When information is presented, it doesn't necessarily mean that it is retained. When readers determine the importance of a text they are more likely to remember it and the information will then become knowledge.

When do we do this as adults? Have you ever read the back of a receipt to check the return policy? Or gone through an insurance bill? Or read the fine print on a contract? In these situations, you are reading through text and pulling out what you deem important for your situation. Susan Zimmermann and Chryse Hutchins, the authors of 7 Keys to Comprehension: How to Help Your Kids Read It and Get It, write that "in everyday life, you continually determine what is important, setting priorities, making decisions about what must be done now and what can wait."² This same skill used in everyday life is transferrable to reading. By talking through this process aloud and modeling it to your children, they will have a deeper understanding of how it works.

What does this look like for children? Children are still learning to differentiate between what is important and what is not important in reading, and in life in general. Using Nonfiction texts helps students pull out important facts from the text. For example, reading picture captions is a great way to pull out important information. Talking about the purpose of reading also benefits children. Zimmerman and Hutchins write, "Your purpose for reading affects how carefully you read and has an impact on what you determine is important."³ Talk to your children about why they are reading and what their motivation is to continue reading. Offer this information to your child about your own reading habits. This might even encourage you to read more yourself!

What do I say to my child to make the most of this reading strategy?

- What was your purpose for reading? How did your purpose help you determine what was important in the text? (For example, reading for fun, reading to learn something new, reading to answer a question or solve a problem.)
- Ask your child to use a highlighter or a sticky note to mark what he or she thinks is important in what he or she is reading. Go back through the pages and have your child explain why certain places are marked.
- Read a paragraph or a page together. Once finished, ask your child to tell you what he or she thinks was the most important part. If all detail is recounted, your child may have missed the important part. Try rereading the paragraph together and identifying the important parts of main ideas together. Model this process with your child. Alternate paragraphs and take turns voicing what is important in those sections. Retelling and summarizing is an important part of determining importance.
- After finishing a book, ask your child what he or she thought was the most important part of the entire story. What did you learn by reading this book? How did this change your thinking about this particular topic?

^{1,2,3} Zimmermann, Susan, and Chryse Hutchins. *7 Keys to Comprehension: How to Help Your Kids Read It and Get It!* New York: Three Rivers, 2003.

Reading Strategy: Metacognition

Comprehension is not an end destination; rather it is a process wherein understanding is constantly refined.¹

What is this? The dictionary defines comprehension as the act of understanding the meaning, nature, or importance. While comprehension is the big umbrella term, a more specific comprehension strategy is metacognition, which can be defined as "thinking about thinking." Good readers use metacognitive strategies to think about and have control over their reading. While reading, the process of thinking about what is being read creates a relationship with the text that deepens the reader's understanding. The ability to comprehend requires the use of other reading strategies including making connections with the text, asking questions, making inferences, creating mental images, and using vocabulary and word knowledge.

When do we do this as adults? How many times have you read a paragraph only to realize you have no idea what it is about? Your eyes saw the words and your brain received the words, but that is where it stopped. Maybe you were thinking about what's for dinner, the previous paragraph, or perhaps you were dozing off. Whatever the situation, you did not comprehend the text. There was no understanding taken from the words. When this happens, as adults, we end up rereading the paragraph to see what exactly was being said. We refocus and use reading strategies to make sense of the text.

What does this look like for children? It is too easy for children to simply go through the motions of reading. Readers of all types can read a paragraph of words. But the crux of the process is to understand what those words mean and how they relate to the meaning of the entire story. Creating mental images of the story and asking questions are two important strategies for children to use. Retelling and summarizing are also ways to increase the understanding of a story. It is important to note that children should use the Five Finger Rule to make sure the books they are choosing are just right. Books that are too hard will be difficult to comprehend.

Comprehension has no boundaries in school or in life – it is found in all content areas and can be developed through reading, writing, listening, drawing, and talking. The more children learn, the easier it will be for them to use their background knowledge to understand and think about new information.

What do I say to my child to make the most of this reading strategy?

- What happened in this paragraph, on that page, in the book? Summarize the plot.
- Did you like this book? Why? What was your favorite part? What have you read that is similar to this book?
- How did the main character grow in this story?
- For younger readers, ask them to retell the story. What were the beginning, middle, and end of the story?
- Use a technique called "Telling a Story Across the Fingers." Ask your child to choose 5 things about the story, or ask your child to retell the story in 5 fingers, or 5 points.
- After finishing the book, look again at the cover. How does the cover tell this story? Compare the paperback and hardcover versions. Try redesigning the cover to get the creative mind going!

¹ Serafini, F., Youngs, S. (2008). *More (advanced) lessons in comprehension: Expanding students' understanding of all type of texts*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Reading Strategy: Fluency

The fluent reader sounds good, is easy to listen to, and reads with enough expression to help the listener understand and enjoy the material.¹

What is this? Fluency can be defined as how accurately, expressively, and quickly someone reads. Fluency incorporates the skills of word recognition, decoding, and comprehension. A fluent reader reads smoothly and with expression. This skill is developed over time and requires practice.

When do we do this as adults? Imagine you are about to give a speech, make an announcement, talk to your boss, or present at a meeting. As you go over your notes you are practicing expression, inflection, and pauses in your remarks. This skill is fluency. You are reviewing your words before you read them aloud because you want them to sound like natural speech. In another situation you are asked to read something you have never seen before, and as you read unfamiliar words slow you down. After rereading it a few times, you have figured out those words and the expression needed to read the text smoothly. Again, this skill is fluency. So much of what makes readers fluent is their practice over time and their ability to recognize words. With this practice comes the ability to add the vocal nuances that make listening to speech interesting. By reading aloud with your child, reading together, or taking turns reading, you are modeling what fluent reading sounds and looks like.

What does this look like for children? Children are still in the practice stage. With each new book they read, children have the ability to recognize more words and read with increased confidence. To increase fluency, children can reread passages, partner read, use a finger or marker to follow along with the words, listen to and read along with books on CD or MP3s, echo read with a partner, and take part in Reader's Theater performances (informal or formal). While reading aloud, children can practice using expression, pauses, and smooth reading. It is important when reading that children have material that is at their reading level. When the text is too hard it is difficult to read it, much less read it fluently. Use the Five Finger Rule when choosing books to make sure the books chosen will set the child up for a successful reading experience. With reading practice, fluency will follow.

What do I say to my child to make the most of this reading strategy?

- I'll read a page, and then you read a page. What do you notice about how I read? What do you notice about how you read? What makes this passage easy? What makes this passage difficult? Let's read it again a few times together. How does it get easier to read after rereading it a few times?
- Reread the hits! Great stories can be read again and again. Use these texts to practice fluent reading.
- As you read, mark the words you do not know. Let's review those together. Vocabulary is part of fluency.
- Let's get a little silly! Can you read this passage like a robot? Like you're underwater? Like you're a racecar driver? What other fun ways can we practice reading this passage? Practice improves fluency!
- Check out a book of poetry. Poetry is a great way to practice fluency while reading. There are also an abundance of websites with great poems for kids.

¹ Clark, Charles. "Building Fluency: Do It Right and Do It Well!" (1999).

Reading Strategy: Summarizing

Summarizing teaches students how to discern the most important ideas in a text, how to ignore irrelevant information, and how to integrate the central ideas in a meaningful way.¹

What is this? Summarizing is reading a text and then thinking about what you just read. The next step is retelling. Retelling a story is the process of a reader telling the story again in his or her own words. The act of summarizing takes retelling one step further when the reader identifies the main points of the story in a simple and concise way. Summarizing is a good strategy because it helps the reader remember more of what he or she read.

When do we do this as adults? Thinking back to the textbooks you read, how often would you skip to the end of the chapter to read the summary? Or skim through the paragraphs looking for “in summary” or “in conclusion?” Authors leave clues in the text to show readers where to find the important information. These clues help the reader summarize. Another example of summarizing can take place after you see a new movie. When a friend or family member asks you what the movie was about, you summarize the plot of the movie by telling him or her the beginning, middle, and maybe the end – depending on whether or not you choose to spoil it! Often you add your own critique, which is the thinking part of summarizing. When reading with your child, take the time to talk about what is important in the story. These conversations will help the summarizing process.

What does this look like for children? If not careful, the details can overpower the beginning, middle, and end of the story when a young reader is summarizing. Have you ever asked your child about something and a few minutes later you’ve heard several “and then’s” and all the minor details, but not the answer? Summarizing requires children to pull out the main ideas of a story and leave out the supporting details. Children should be encouraged to keep a reading journal and/or use sticky notes while reading. It helps the development of the summarizing strategy when children stop to think about what they are reading around the beginning, middle, and end of the story. If at each of these points a child takes notes, it will be easier at the end of the book to determine the main ideas and then create a summary. Young readers should actively be looking for the clues left by the author as they learn to summarize what they are reading.

What do I say to my child to make the most of this reading strategy?

- Retell this story. What happened at the beginning, middle, and end?
- What are the main ideas of this story? What are the supporting details?
- Can you think of any cause and effect relationships in the text?
- What does this story make you think about? Can you compare it to anything else you’ve read?
- What questions do you still have about the book?
- After creating a summary, ask what does this story mean to you?
- Try using the Paragraph Shrinking strategy² where readers take turns reading, pausing, and summarizing the main points of each paragraph. Along the way make notes about the main points. Ask your child how this strategy can help when reading longer texts with more details.

¹ "Summarizing." *Reading Rockets*. WETA Washington, D.C., 2011. Web. <<http://www.readingrockets.org/strategies/summarizing/>>.

² "Paragraph Shrinking." *Reading Rockets*. WETA Washington, D.C., 2011. Web. <http://www.readingrockets.org/strategies/paragraph_shrinking/>.

Reading Strategy: Synthesis

A synthesis occurs as you summarize what has happened [in the story] and what it means to you.¹

What is this? The strategy of synthesis is where all the reading strategies come together. Synthesizing requires using background knowledge, the ability to determine importance, being able to retell a story, and being able to summarize a story. Retelling a story is the process of a reader telling the story again in his or her own words. Summarizing takes retelling a step further when the reader identifies the main points of the story in a simple and concise way. Synthesis happens when readers reflect on what has been read and think critically about it. Readers who synthesize play an active role in reading and create a relationship with the text. During this process, the reader relates the information to his or herself by asking “What does it all mean to me?” Synthesizing not only helps with comprehension, it also deepens thinking and enhances understanding of and about a text.

When do we do this as adults? Imagine you are setting up a brand new board game with your family. As the game board and player pieces are set out, you are reading the directions and rules of play. As you read, you take into account the age of your children, their knowledge, and their experience. Once the board is set up, you begin to synthesize the game rules and then communicate them to your family. During this process, you pulled out the important information and applied it to the situation you were in. That’s synthesis. As adults, we do this each and every day. As we constantly receive new information, we take out what is important, apply it to ourselves, and then communicate it to others. Other examples of synthesis include, telling a friend about the book you just read and responding to a work email involving different topics or subjects.

What does this look like for children? Reading is not a spectator sport. Readers must be actively engaged in each paragraph, page, and chapter to make the most of the reading experience. In this active sport, the reader is the key player. Children are still learning how to best use each reading strategy. Synthesis is something that must be practiced to master. Often children can retell a story but summarizing is a little trickier. Work with your child to pull out the main ideas of a story. To model this strategy, talk about what the story means to you or a connection you make to the story. Then ask your child to do the same with the text. These conversations will create meaningful reading experiences for all involved.

What do I say to my child to make the most of this reading strategy?

- Retell this story. What happened at the beginning, middle, and end?
- What are the main ideas of this story? What are the supporting details?
- Can you think of any cause and effect relationships in the text?
- What does this story make you think about? Can you compare it to anything else you’ve read?
- What questions do you still have about the book?
- Create a story map or a storyboard of the plot of the book. Visit the District 105 website for story map, storyboard, and graphic organizers to use in this process.

¹ Zimmermann, Susan, and Chryse Hutchins. *7 Keys to Comprehension: How to Help Your Kids Read It and Get It!* New York: Three Rivers, 2003.