

Reading Comprehension: Ten Principles

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, University of Pennsylvania/East Stroudsburg professor Maureen McLaughlin lays out the goal of reading instruction – “teaching students to become active, strategic readers who successfully comprehend text” – and presents ten principles of reading comprehension she believes every teacher should know:

- *Principle #1: Comprehension is the active construction of meaning as the reader makes connections between prior knowledge and the text.*

- *Principle #2: Most of what we know about comprehension comes from studying good readers.* They work at making sense of what they are reading, have clear goals, ask themselves questions as they read, monitor their progress, have a repertoire of strategies, problem-solve and “fix up” when they aren’t understanding, discover new information on their own, think about their thinking, and read widely in a variety of texts.

- *Principle #3: It’s all about good teaching.* Effective teachers believe all children can learn; differentiate instruction using a variety of techniques and groupings; understand that students learn best in authentic situations; orchestrate print-rich, concept-rich environments; have in-depth knowledge of reading, writing, speaking, and listening; provide lots of opportunities for students to read, write, and discuss; draw on insights gained from good readers; and constantly use assessment evidence to fine-tune instruction.

- *Principle #4: Motivation is a key factor.* Effective teachers make students want to read by creating the right environment, making compelling texts available, and instilling intrinsic motivation.

- *Principle #5: Explicitly teaching a variety of reading comprehension strategies builds students’ reasoning power.* These include previewing, self-questioning, making connections, visualizing, knowing how words work, monitoring (*Does this make sense?*), summarizing, and evaluating.

- *Principle #6: Vocabulary development is essential.* It is fostered by building students’ interest in learning and using new words, developing precision in word use, getting students actively involved in the process, studying how words work, exposing students to new words multiple times, and extending vocabulary development to other subject areas.

- *Principle #7: Students should read a variety of types and levels of text.* These should include instructional-level books for teacher-guided lessons and easier texts for independent reading. Motivation and achievement increase when students read texts that interest them.

- *Principle #8: Students should use multiple modes to represent their thinking.* Oral and written responses are fine, but students should also be able to sketch, dramatize, sing, and create projects about their reading.

- *Principle #9: Constantly check for understanding.* Teachers should observe students as they read and discuss, look at their informal written responses, and use other assessments – and use insights gained to follow up and fine-tune instruction.

• *Principle #10: Push students to comprehend at deeper levels.* Students need to go beyond passively accepting a text's message and read between and beyond the lines, thinking about the author's purpose and the underlying message of the text. "Critical literacy focuses on the problem and its complexity," says McLaughlin. "It addresses issues of power and promotes reflection, action, and transformation."

"Reading Comprehension: What Every Teacher Needs to Know" by Maureen McLaughlin in *The Reading Teacher*, April 2012 (Vol. 65, #7, p. 432-440), <http://www.reading.org>; the author can be reached at mmclaughlin@esu.edu.