

Helping Children with Learning Disabilities Understand What They Read

By Regina G. Richards (2008)

A student struggling to understand what he reads, often misinterprets assignments and fails to grasp concepts. This is very frustrating for students otherwise capable of interpreting the information.

Researchers have thoroughly studied this problem for several decades. We now have a solid foundation and understanding of what is required for students to learn to read. In brief, studies reveal that adult monitoring and modeling of strategies is critical along with a program using techniques that are multisensory, systematic, and well structured.

"Reading failure is a major problem for society. Leaders in this field emphasize "the downstream consequences of poor reading are so much greater than the reading failure itself." The consequences include poor self-esteem, difficulty in social development, and interference with future employment." (1)

Reading comprehension is an issue that students must deal with throughout all of school. Even as adults, we continue to need to adapt our reading strategies for various tasks. As an example, suppose I want to learn a new computer program. I buy the software, read the manual, and follow the steps. However, much of the vocabulary is new and I may need to ask for assistance in understanding some of the basic concepts. Eventually, as I begin to get more comfortable with this particular writing, I also begin to adjust to the patterns and it makes more sense, and I realize that throughout this learning adventure, I have been learning to read while also reading to learn.

In this article, you will find some basic strategies and techniques to help your students with homework tasks that involve reading comprehension.

1. A review of basic strategies
2. Specific examples to help in vocabulary development
3. Specific strategies for students to use to enhance their understanding while in the process of reading

Above all, remember to have fun, use consistency, and maintain structure. As a result, you and your student will both benefit more from the results.

BASIC STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES

When we read, our overall goal is to monitor our understanding and make sure that we are getting meaning from the printed page. This comprehension monitoring is a process that is critical for students to develop, and it is one which students often overlook. Encouraging your student to monitor understanding and use strategies while reading is a critical gift that will provide benefits throughout life.

Multisensory strategies

Students derive more benefit from activities in which they actively participate. Active learning enhances efficiency and the child understands and grasps concepts with greater depth.

Multisensory techniques increase active awareness. Students, especially those with learning challenges, benefit from being able to pull in memory hooks (mnemonics) along with multisensory techniques.

"Multisensory instruction is the linkage of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic-tactile modalities. Students simultaneously link the visual symbol (what they see) with its corresponding sound (what they hear) and kinesthetic-tactile input (what they feel) as they write a letter accurately and say the corresponding sound(s)." (2)

Chunking

Chunking is a computer term that means "bundles of information". It refers to breaking information or a task into smaller manageable parts. There are many ways to use chunking in homework sessions.

Suppose your child is complaining about an assignment and makes a statement such as, "This chapter is way too long. It's not worth reading."

- First, acknowledge your child's feelings with a statement such as, "You're right. This is a long chapter. It may require a lot of energy, but think about how proud of yourself you'll be when you finish it. Also, realize how it will help you get a better grade in your discussion or on your test."
- Then proceed to help your child divide the activity into manageable chunks. For example, determine how many days he has to complete the reading and divide the task into that many chunks.
- If the chunks are still too large, divide each of those chunks into a smaller chunk or section to complete.
- Have your child read only one chunk and then use a concrete strategy to summarize what he read.
- Then have your child read another chunk and summarize it.
- After reading all of the chunks, have your child pull together each summary and use those to review the chapter.

Help your child appreciate these important aspects about the chunking process:

- Students can store and organize information more efficiently in small chunks
- Everything begins with one small step
- The small steps that up to a bigger accomplishment

Visually organizing information

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Many students who struggle with reading and writing tasks, and many students who prefer to avoid such tasks for other reasons, often tend to be visual in how they process information. Thus, encouraging the use of visual skills can be a great asset while reading to comprehend.

Visualization

Visualization is a process where the students create a visual picture mentally to correspond to the ideas they are listening to or reading. Visualization is a powerful tool that helps many students comprehend a passage. It increases active reading and helps the information "stick".

To encourage visualization, have your student close her eyes and imagine a common object. Then have your child verbally describe or draw what she imagined.

Once she understands the process, you may move to the next step. You read a sentence and cue her to develop visual images by asking detailed questions. As an example, consider the sentence, "The girl scurried down the street." Possible questions include,

- What does the street look like?
- How do you think the girl is going down the street?
- What size is the girl?
- What is she wearing?
- What colors are in her clothes?
- What you think the girl is thinking or feeling as she is running?
- Is it daytime or night? What in your picture in your head led you to that conclusion?

Reinforce that there are no right or wrong answers and each person creates a different visual picture. The important aspect is to be able to explain why you imagined your image, for example, that the girl is small. What cues did you use?

"Enhancing a student's use of the mind's eye enhances comprehension. Strategies are useful tool to accomplish this." (3)

Another way to represent information visually is to have your child draw a picture that shows what he read. Many children may find that representing in picture form creates a visual image that clarifies the meaning and the connection between people or events in what they read.

Visual organizers

Visual organizers are other extremely valuable techniques and there are many different types of visual organizers. It is useful to select a format that matches the type of information the student is reading. Three of many ways that organizers may be used are:

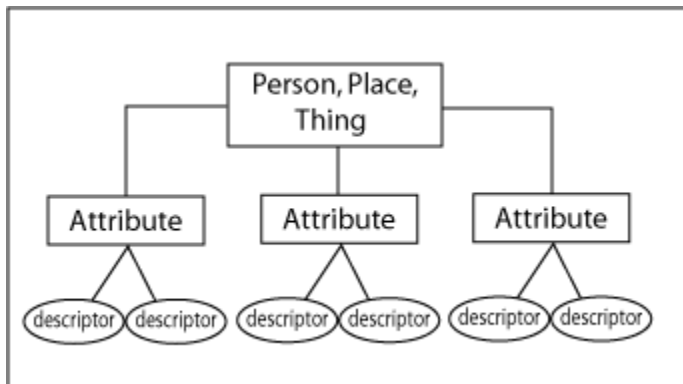
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- Before beginning to read, create an organizer of the primary sections.
 - During the reading, add additional details.
- While reading, create an organizer using information as it appears.
- After reading, create an organizer to summarize what the information.

Following are some examples of common types of visual organizers.

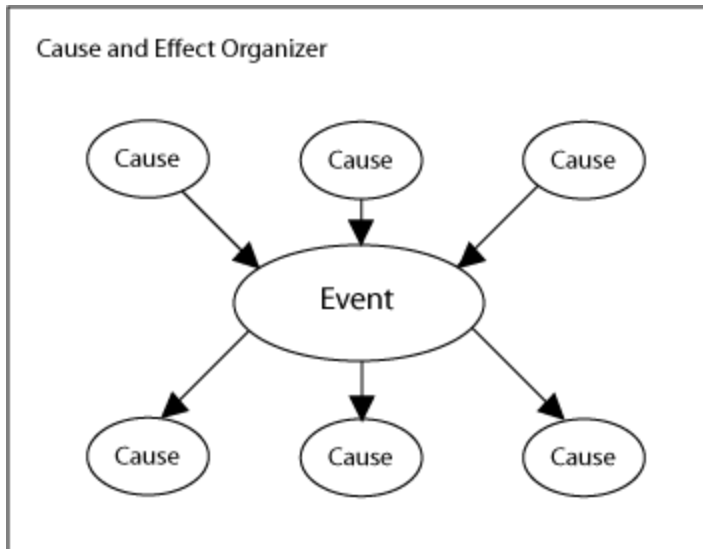
Basic visual organizers

Format for a basic organizer:

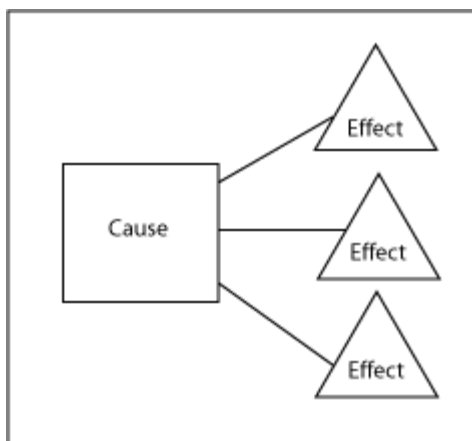


A descriptive organizer focusing on attributes of a person, place, or thing. (4)

Cause and effect organizers



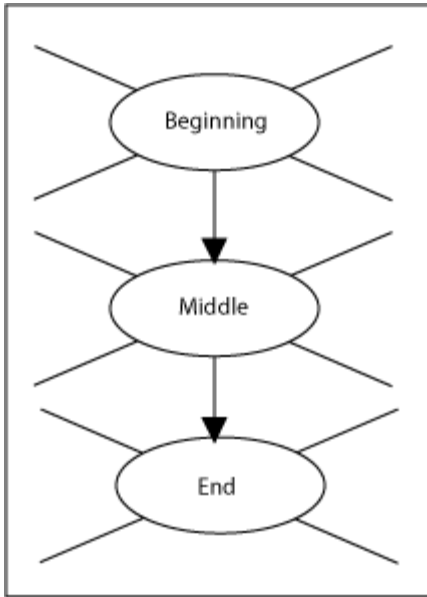
In this example, many causes lead to an event. (5)



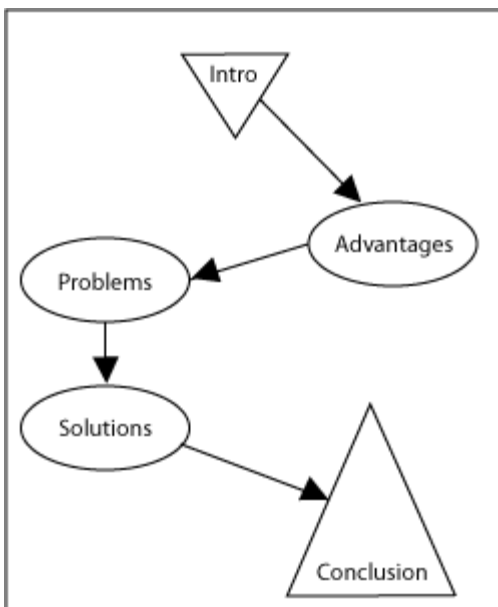
In this example, one cause leads to many effects. (6)

Organizers to identify the sequence or episode: episodic organizers

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An event can be organized beginning with what happened first.



This organizer progresses from an introduction to a conclusion.

VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

Accurately understanding the vocabulary is a very important aspect of both listening and reading comprehension. You can help your student enhance his vocabulary through a variety of interactive, hands-on experiences. The more

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fun and involvement your student has, the more efficient will be his recall. It will also be easier for him to generalize his knowledge to new situations.

Whenever possible, encourage your child to think of a key or a hook to help remember a given word. He can then act out (or pantomime) the hook. This develops motor memory which is a very powerful way to help trigger the meaning, as in the following examples:

Angles

Learning the names of different angles causes confusion for many students. Let's use three common angles as an example of incorporating motor memory and "hooks." In this example, students learn the names of right angle, acute angle, and obtuse angle.

Right angle – have your student make a right angle with their first finger and thumb, with exaggerated movement, say "Right on! Right angle!"



Acute angle – have your student make an acute angle using her pointer and middle finger. Using exaggerated movement and voice, have your student say, "Oh, what a cute angle! Acute angle!"



Obtuse angle – have your child make an obtuse angle using his pinky and thumb. Then, with an exaggerated "high five" movement with his hand, he says, "Hang loose, obtuse!"

"When students learn vocabulary words by rote and mechanically, as when memorizing the definition, many quickly forget. Even if they happen to remember the definition, they may struggle to apply it and generalize their knowledge." (7)

Prepositions

Students can act out the meaning of prepositions by role-playing with a box: they can climb into, around, through, over, and under the box.

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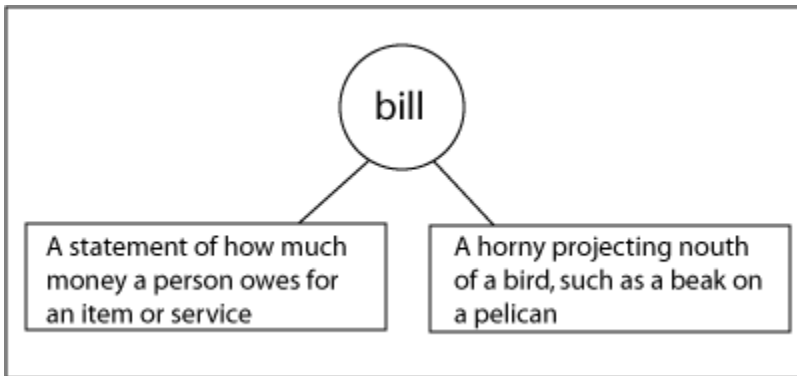
Older students may prefer a wad of cotton and a small toy airplane to demonstrate the meaning of many prepositions. They can move their airplane in relationship to the cotton to demonstrate the meaning of words such as above, before, past, behind, across, below, beneath, beside, in, to, along, between, in, beyond, over, on.

Explain that a preposition is a word that describes the relationship between a toy airplane and the cotton: a preposition is like a word that points.

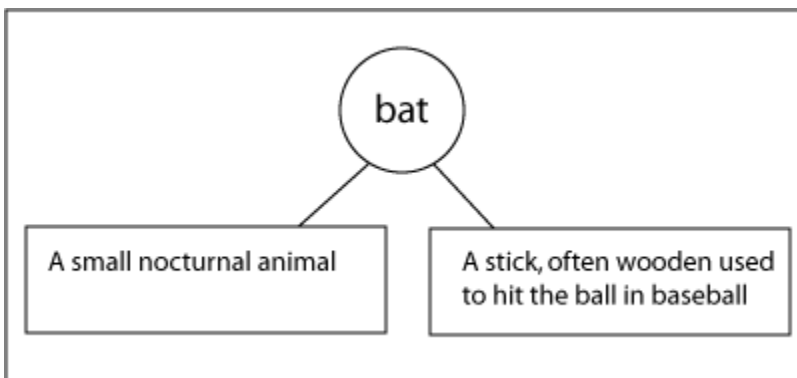
Multiple meaning words

The understanding of words with more than one meaning is a developmental process that continues throughout a student's school career (and one's lifetime). Students with learning differences and those with second language issues may have tremendous difficulty with this aspect of development.

A visual organizer is very helpful to analyze a word with more than one meaning. The following examples show simple organizers for two meanings of the words bat and bill. To enhance the activity and make it more fun, you can add a riddle that plays with the meanings of the word, as an example for the word bill.



Two meanings for the word bill.



Two meanings for the word bat.

A related riddle

Question: What happened to the pelican who stuck his head in the light socket?

Answer: He now has an electric bill!

As another activity, a student may brainstorm all the different meanings she can think of for a given word. For example, how many meanings can you think of for the word run. Create a visual organizer, similar to the ones above but with more sections.

Morphology (word parts)

A critical aspect of learning to read, spell, and comprehend involves having an understanding of word parts. Young children can begin this understanding by comparing different words that end with -ing. For example, what is similar about words such as running, jumping, and singing? Help the child realize that these words are all actions that we can do. The ending -ing often means that the word is an action.

An activity for children beginning in early elementary is to use a chart such as the one below to emphasize the value of word parts. With older students, use more complex word parts because the complexity of vocabulary and concepts dramatically increases as students move through school.

For example,

uni			
bi			
tri			

Start with the word part "bi" and ask your child to think of as many words as he can that begin with this word part. He might think of words such as bicycle and binoculars. Work with your child to determine what the word part "bi" means (it means two). You may write his words on the appropriate spaces on the chart.

Next, ask your child if he can think of another word that has the same ending word part as in bicycle ("cycle"). Perhaps he will think of tricycle. You can then show the relationship between these two words by filling in the chart as follows:

	cycle		
uni			
bi	bicycle		

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tri	tricycle		
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Discuss the meaning of the word tricycle and the word parts "tri" and "cycle". Then introduce the word unicycle and have your child guess what it means. Add it to the chart.

Depending upon your child's age and experience, use other word parts such as "angle" to create words such as triangle or "lingual" to create words such as bilingual and trilingual. Older children may explore words such as unilateral and bilateral. Dinosaur names are also fun to explore and use.

SPECIFIC COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES

One of the keys to comprehension is that the student must be actively involved. Students too often run their eyes over the lines of print and reach the end of the page thinking they have "read" the material. This passive process is not "reading." Reading comprehension is an active process that needs to engage the reader. As a reader, you grasp meaning by thinking during the act of reading. You also bring prior knowledge about the concepts and ideas to the reading activity.

"Reading comprehension is intentional thinking during which meaning is constructed through interactions between text and reader." (8)

Reading must be purposeful. Reading must be active. The reader can read a text to learn, to obtain information, or to be entertained. These different purposes each require a different set of strategies, but also have some commonalities:

- The reader needs to understand the meaning of the words within the text
- The reader needs to have a techniques to construct a memory of what he understood
- The reader needs to use his understanding

Mnemonics

he following mnemonics are generalized techniques that help a reader monitor his understanding as he reads and then have a tool to organize the information. This organization will help him construct a memory of what he understood. This tool he has developed will then be useful when he returns to the material to review and/or share his understanding, as it will help her "hook" in to the information. (9)

In the following strategies, each letter stands for a single step that the child performs. Be sure to help your child understand each step separately. Then show your child how the steps come together to form the mnemonic, explaining that he can then use the mnemonic as a memory hint or hook to trigger each of the steps.

An important aspect about these comprehension strategies is that students frequently require a great deal of explanation and modeling. You need to describe each step completely and show your child how to use the step (this is modeling). Some children need to be shown many times before they are able to do it on their own. Other children, once they see the strategy a few times, are then able to use that step on their own. Some may require

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reminders, but others may not. There is no right or wrong way to learn a strategy: some children simply require more time.

When students begin to use these strategies consistently, they find they will more effectively monitor their own comprehension. Using these strategies helps the students continually think about questions such as,

- Am I understanding what I read?
- How can I remember?
- Does it make sense? (10)

Students can also combine strategies. For example, they may wish to use one of the use following strategies combined with drawing or creating visual organizers.

Examples of mnemonics related to reading comprehension

- Mnemonics for previewing text
 - TP
 - TELLS
- Mnemonics to use during reading
 - RCRC
 - SQ3R

TP

This mnemonic is a reminder for students to use general previewing strategies to preview the structure of a textbook before beginning to read.

T stands for "Textbook structure".

The student looks at chapter headings, captions under pictures and graphs, the index, appendices, bold print and/or vocabulary definitions, and questions at the end of the chapter.

P stands for "Paragraph structure".

The student analyzes how paragraphs are organized within the chapter. He searches for the introductory or topic sentence in each paragraph to determine if they are generally at the beginning of the paragraph. He looks for keywords and for conclusions.

The conclusion of the TP strategy is for your student to try to guess the meaning of the passage using only the minimal cues derived from analyzing the structure. Be sure your student then reads to verify the accuracy of her guesses and that she systematically does verify or just each guess.

TELLS

This mnemonic strategy provides an organized way for students to preview the structure of stories, either fiction or nonfiction. There are five steps in the TELLs mnemonic.

T stands for Title: have your student look for clues about the story.

E stands for Examine: have your student examine the story for picture or word clues that will aid her understanding.

L stands for Look: have your child look at important words or pictures. You might wish to discuss these.

L stands for Look up: have your child look up hard words that she may not know and help her work with her sounding out strategies.

S stands for Setting: have your child identify where and when the story occurred.

Your child has now previewed the story and developed a basic framework to which she can attach the information she gathers as she reads.

RCRC

This mnemonic strategy is extremely valuable in encouraging students to monitor their comprehension while reading. It encourages the student to question himself continually about his understanding as he moves through the text.

R stands for Read: your child reads a small part of the material one or two times.

C stands for Cover: your child covers the material he just read.

R stands for Retell: your child retells what he just read. This creates a review and a monitoring. He may summarize the story to himself or to you.

C stands for Check: your child checks to see if he remembered the information correctly. He compares his recall to the actual material.

This strategy works more efficiently if your child works with only one small chunk at a time. Afterwards he may combine all of the chunks for an overall summary.

SQ3R

This strategy is similar to RCRC, but it is a bit more complicated. It is especially helpful for longer passages.

S stands for Survey: your child surveys the text.

Q stands for Question: your child creates questions by restating each heading and subheading.

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3R stands for 3 steps, each beginning with R.

R stands for Read: your child reads to answer the questions he created.

R stands for Recite: your child recites the answers to his questions either silently or aloud

The Post-it™ Notes Strategy

As your student reads a section, have her place a Post-it™ note on that section and record a key word or phrase that represents a significant fact or main idea. At the end of the paragraph (or section), your child then organizes the Post-it® notes in order and creates a more specific visual organizer.

The last step to this strategy is for your child to review the information. Depending on your child's age and inclinations, he may draw, recite to himself or someone else, or create an outline. This strategy is effective at all levels, even in college.

"Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body!" (11)

IN SUMMARY

These tips for your reading comprehension toolbox are just a few of many that are available. Hopefully, they will be useful to you and your student with your particular homework situation. Here are some valuable reminders:

- Remember to use chunking: go slowly and apply or use only one part at a time.
- Use multisensory strategies.
- Teach your child a strategy one step at a time.
- And above all,

RESOURCES

- Lavoie, Richard. How Difficult Can This Be? – FAT City (video or DVD) (Available in the LD OnLine Store)
- Levine, Melvin D. Educational Care: A System for Understanding Children with Learning Differences at Home and at School. 2001. (www.retctrpress.com) (www.epsbooks.com)
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FOOTNOTES

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2. Henry, Marcia K. *Unlocking Literacy: Effective Decoding and Spelling Instruction*, 2003, (www.retctrpress.com), (www.brookespublishing.com), page 50.
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4. Richards, Regina G. *The Source for Dyslexia and Dysgraphia*. 1999. (www.linguisystems.com) Page 253.
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11. Steele, Sir Richard. Quoted from Sousa, David. *How The Brain Learns to Read*, preface. (www.corwinpress.com)