

# The **Primary** Comprehension **Toolkit** Language and Lessons for Active Literacy

**Stephanie Harvey & Anne Goudvis**

## Teacher's Guide



***Dedication:*** *To Smokey Daniels—our editor extraordinaire, thoughtful colleague, and good friend. We're thrilled that you can channel our thinking so clearly and keep us laughing along the way.*

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Photography: David Stirling, Mason Jones, Smokey Daniels, David Johnson

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
CIP data on file with the Library of Congress

The Primary Comprehension Toolkit Teacher's Guide  
ISBN-13: 978-0-325-02154-, ISBN-10: 0-325-02154-6

The Primary Comprehension Toolkit: Language and Lessons for Active Literacy  
ISBN-13: 978-0-325-00997-1, ISBN-10: 0-325-00997-X

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper  
12 11 10 09 08 ML 1 2 3 4 5



firsthand

An imprint of Heinemann  
361 Hanover Street  
Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912  
firsthand.heinemann.com  
Office and agents throughout the world

# Six Key Strategies

Our primary grade comprehension instruction centers on the specific kinds of thinking that proficient readers have been shown to use. We have extensively reviewed and explained this research in our book, *Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension for Understanding and Engagement* (Second Edition, Stenhouse, 2007).

No matter what their age, effective readers use the following six strategies:

## Monitor Comprehension

When readers monitor their comprehension, they keep track of their thinking as they read, listen, and view. They notice when the text makes sense and when it doesn't. They distinguish between what the text is about—the events of the narrative—and what it makes them think about. Primary grade kids are always thinking about what they hear, see, and (if they can) read. They are noticing, wondering, making connections, and making judgments all the time. When they monitor their comprehension, they use that awareness to steer their thinking as they enter texts. They expect to interact with the pictures, the features, the words, and the ideas. Rather than simply retelling the story, kids need to go beyond retelling to merge their thinking with the text. This is how they come up with the “big ideas.” So we focus on teaching kids not just to retell, but to think about the words, the pictures, the features, and the ideas that spring from the text. They stay on track when they talk, draw, and write about their thinking. By interacting with the text and with each other, they gain understanding.

## Activate and Connect

David Pearson reminds us that “Today's new knowledge is tomorrow's background knowledge.” The background knowledge we bring to learning colors every aspect of our understanding. Whether we are connecting, questioning, or inferring, background knowledge is the foundation of our thinking. We simply can't understand what we hear, read, or view without thinking about what we already know. To comprehend, learners must connect the new to the known. So we consider every conceivable way to build our kids' background knowledge to prepare them to learn new information. We begin by encouraging young learners to think about what they already know and care about, and then have them explore those topics. As kids go on to read widely in nonfiction, they are bombarded with new information. In order to understand it, if they need to merge their thinking with the information, stopping and reacting as they go. By making connections to what they already know, they make sense of their new learning, and acquire new knowledge.

## Ask Questions

Curiosity is at the heart of teaching and learning. Young kids burst through the door bubbling over with questions: “Why is the sky blue? Where does the sun go at night? What happened to the cowboys?” Questions spur curious minds to investigate. Questions open doors to understanding the world. We have to mine them with a pick axe! When young readers read nonfiction and meet new information, they

brim with questions. As we try to answer our questions, we discover new information and gain knowledge. Questions can spur further research and inquiry. Instead of demanding answers all the time, we need to teach kids to ask thoughtful and insightful questions. After all, if we hope to develop critical thinkers, we must teach our kids to think about and question what they listen to, read, and view. Asking questions enriches the learning experience and leads to deeper understanding. Questioning is the strategy that propels learners forward.

### **Infer and Visualize**

Inferring is the bedrock of understanding. It involves taking what you know, your background knowledge, and merging it with clues in the text to come up with some information that isn't explicitly stated. Inferential thinking helps readers to figure out unfamiliar words, draw conclusions, develop interpretations, make predictions, surface themes, and even create mental images.

Visualizing is sort of a first cousin to inferring. When readers visualize, they construct meaning by creating mental images, seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and even smelling! Young children seem particularly inclined to visualize in support of understanding as they listen to and read stories, often living through or living in the stories. When children infer and visualize as they listen, read, and view, they respond with joy, glee, or sometimes dread. Inferring and visualizing enable kids to get at the deeper meaning in text.

### **Determine Importance**

When we read nonfiction, we are reading to learn and remember information. Once kids know how to merge their thinking with the information, it's time to help them figure out what makes sense to remember. We can't possibly remember every fact or piece of information we read, nor should we. We teach kids to tell the difference between interesting details and salient, important information. When kids learn to paraphrase, they are well on their way to understanding the information and shaping it into their own thought. In *PTK*, kids also learn to distinguish between facts, questions, and responses so they can sort and sift information to better organize it. They use note-taking scaffolds to hold their thinking as they prepare to share it with others.

### **Summarize and Synthesize**

Synthesizing information nudges kids to see the "big picture." It pulls together their thinking, and they learn as they read and write about it. It's not enough for readers to simply recall or restate the facts. They need to use a variety of comprehension strategies including asking questions, inferring, and determining what's important to understand big ideas. We begin by simply asking young readers to stop and collect their thoughts before reading on. Eventually, children summarize and synthesize their thinking by drawing and writing in all sorts of original ways: creating poems, posters, books, and other projects that demonstrate their learning and understanding. Most importantly, synthesizing has an authentic purpose: kids share their learning with their peers and teachers, who respond with their thoughts and ideas. In this way, the classroom becomes a community of learners in which everyone is both a learner and a teacher.