



COMPREHENSION BUILDER

Rationale & Research Basis

Comprehension Builder: Rationale & Research Basis

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Comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading. Word recognition and language comprehension work together to help a reader achieve this goal—but the process of getting there is not as straightforward as it sounds. Reading comprehension is not an inherent byproduct—it requires active engagement and deliberate effort. Rather than passively taking in meaning, good readers analyze text, internalize it, and make meaning for themselves. Many developing readers struggle with this process, which is why it’s part of our role as their educators to explicitly teach them how to interact deeply with text.

Comprehension Builder is a practical resource that makes it easy for teachers to effectively and efficiently develop lasting comprehension skills for readers, regardless of age, instructional setting, time constraints, or areas of need.

Comprehension Builder is divided into two sections: one for reading comprehension strategy lessons and one for question-specific comprehension lessons. The lessons make use of explicit teaching, modeling, gradual release of responsibility, collaborative learning, frequent opportunities to respond (OTR), and scaffolded support. Comprehension Builder includes high-interest, knowledge-building text with rich vocabulary, numerous options for adapting and differentiating instruction, and practical suggestions for extending practice beyond Comprehension Builder lessons.

The information below details the rationale and research basis for the contents and design of Comprehension Builder, including the reading comprehension strategies and question types addressed, as well as other incorporated elements relevant to comprehension, and the instructional components employed throughout.

Reading Comprehension Strategies

Rationale / Research Basis

According to the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) reading comprehension depends on the ability to both decode and understand what is read. Decoding, they say, is not sufficient for reading but is necessary in order to comprehend. A number of studies have confirmed the validity of the Simple View formula which states that reading comprehension equals the product of decoding and language comprehension (Farrell, et al., n.d.). If a student’s reading comprehension is impacted by the ability to decode, the student may need to focus on decoding until those skills are not interfering with processing meaning, or until the hard cognitive work of decoding is removed from the equation (Liben & Liben, 2019). When we teach students how to think during their reading, we are teaching reading comprehension strategies. Teaching these strategies helps turn readers into learners who actively construct meaning. The Institute of Educational Sciences (IES) Practice Guide: *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade* (Shanahan et al., 2010) defines a reading comprehension strategy as the intentional application of a cognitive routine before, during, or after reading a text, such as the intentional mental actions while reading that improve reading comprehension and deliberate efforts to better understand or remember what is being read.

Application in Comprehension Builder

In the Identification of Students section of the introduction to Comprehension Builder, guidance on selecting students who would benefit from working in the lessons is provided, including the recommendation to focus on decoding skills if the students’ comprehension is impacted by their ability to decode words. Section 1 of Comprehension Builder includes a set of lessons focused on the research-based strategies identified in the IES Practice Guide: *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade* (Shanahan et al., 2010) for better comprehension. This section is organized into three categories: those used before reading to prepare the mind for meaning-making, those used during reading to deepen understanding, and those used after reading to reflect, consolidate, and extend comprehension.

Teachers may use these lessons to explicitly teach strategies that students can carry into any reading context and to support the development of healthy reading habits that foster deep engagement and meaningful interaction with text.

Before-Reading Strategies

Rationale / Research Basis

According to the IES Practice Guide: *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade* (Shanahan et al., 2010), strategies such as activating prior knowledge and making predictions can improve reading comprehension both when taught separately or when taught in combination with other effective comprehension strategies. The guide also recommends teaching students how to look for and learn key words that help them understand text and demonstrate how to draw inferences from such words. Using these practices provides students with a framework from which to expand their knowledge and understanding and to deepen connections to new information as they read.

Activating Prior Knowledge

Rationale / Research Basis

When students activate prior knowledge, they tap into what they already know to help them make connections to and comprehend the text they are about to read. Activating prior knowledge is one example of an effective reading comprehension strategy that should be taught to students (Shanahan et al., 2010). Students who have background knowledge about a topic from home, school, or other experiences are often better able to understand new information because they can connect it to what they already know and anticipate ideas they are likely to encounter in the text (The IRIS Center, n.d.).

Learning Key Words

Rationale / Research Basis

When students are taught the key words in a story, they learn the often-challenging vocabulary words that can be crucial for making sense of the text. Understanding these words can also help them make predictions and draw inferences. Vaughn et al. (2022) recommend that prior to reading, you should teach students the meaning of a few words that are essential for understanding the passage and how to derive meanings of unknown words using context. Students need to be able to determine the meaning of words that are new to them but not taught directly. It is important that they develop effective word-learning strategies including how to use dictionaries and other reference aids (e.g. glossaries), how to use information about meaningful word parts to figure out the meanings of words, and how to use context clues (Reading Rockets, n.d.).

Application in Comprehension Builder

In the Before-Reading Strategies lesson, students learn to employ the evidence-based practices of activating prior knowledge, learning key words, and making predictions.

Application in Comprehension Builder

In Activity 1 of the Before-Reading Strategies lesson, students learn that activating prior knowledge before reading can help them make connections to, understand, and retain the information they read. They also practice using the activating prior knowledge strategy and review what they have learned.

Application in Comprehension Builder

In Activity 2 of the Before-Reading Strategies lesson, students learn about, practice attending to, and determine the meanings of key words using the key words and definitions included with each story, as well as the optional glossaries, to help them think about the text they will read. They also practice the strategy for learning key words and review what they have learned.

Making Predictions

Rationale / Research Basis

A strategy that leads readers to anticipate what the author will reveal is prediction—a tool that can be applied in certain reading situations but only works if there is relevant knowledge available (Shanahan, 2023). When students make predictions about the text they are about to read, they use their prior knowledge of and experience with similar or related topics to set expectations and form questions. Then as they read, students may mentally revise their predictions and find answers to their questions. Making predictions is one example of an effective reading comprehension strategy that should be taught to students (Shanahan et al., 2010).

Application in Comprehension Builder

In Activity 3 of the Before-Reading Strategies lesson, students learn that making predictions before reading can help them make connections to, understand, and retain information in text. They practice using prior knowledge and key words (along with other clues like the story title and picture) to make a prediction about a story. They also practice the strategy for making predictions and review what they have learned.

During-Reading Strategies

Rationale / Research Basis

According to the IES Practice Guide: *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade* (Shanahan et al., 2010), learning during-reading strategies such as questioning, visualizing, making inferences, and monitoring, clarifying, and fix-up prepares students to read for meaning by empowering them to form and attempt to answer questions about the text, develop mental images of what is described in the passage, generate information that is missing or not explicitly stated, and pay attention to whether they understand. When they do not understand, rereading or using these strategies will help them.

Application in Comprehension Builder

In the During-Reading Strategies lesson, students learn to employ the evidence-based practices of questioning, visualizing, making inferences, monitoring, clarifying, and fix-up.

Questioning

Rationale / Research Basis

Shanahan et al. (2010) found that when the questioning strategy was taught alongside other comprehension strategies, it had positive effects on reading comprehension. When students use this strategy, they develop and answer questions about the important ideas in the text while reading, using words such as *where* and *why* to guide their thinking. Vaughn et al. (2022) also recommend that students be taught how to ask questions about the text while they are reading in order to gain a deeper understanding of the text's meaning. Brookins (2026) supports this by recommending teaching students to pause and notice their understanding, monitor their comprehension so they recognize when meaning breaks down, and supporting them in repairing their comprehension.

Application in Comprehension Builder

In Activity 3 of the Before-Reading Strategies lesson, students learn that making predictions before reading can help them make connections to, understand, and retain information in text. They practice using prior knowledge and key words (along with other clues like the story title and picture) to make a prediction about a story. They also practice the strategy for making predictions and review what they have learned.

Visualizing

Rationale / Research Basis

Shanahan et al. (2010) found that visualization resulted in large and statistically significant gains in reading comprehension. When students use the strategy of visualization, they create mental images of what is being described in the text. Generating these mental images requires readers to actively engage with the text and encourages them to use their imagination and the sensory details provided in the text (Reading Rockets, n.d.).

Application in Comprehension Builder

In Activity 2 of the During-Reading Strategies lesson, students review the five senses, read a practice story, and consider whether the text helps them imagine seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, or touching/feeling anything. They also practice the visualizing strategy and review what they have learned.

Making Inferences

Rationale / Research Basis

Inferencing is a cognitive process that is foundational to higher-order thinking, and teachers should foster students' awareness of when they make inferences (Marzano, 2010). Inference training was found to have positive effects on reading comprehension (Shanahan et al., 2010). When students use this strategy, they generate important information to construct meaning from what is not directly stated in a text.

Application in Comprehension Builder

In Activity 3 of the During-Reading Strategies lesson, students learn how to connect their prior knowledge with clues from the story to create a list of inferences. They also practice the making inferences strategy and review what they have learned.

Note: The Making Inferences lesson in Section 2 of Comprehension Builder contains a complete lesson for teaching students to make inferences and to answer inferential questions after reading.

Monitoring, Clarifying, and Fix-up

Rationale / Research Basis

Shanahan et al. (2010) found that teaching monitoring, clarifying, and fix-up strategies as part of a package of multiple comprehension strategies had positive effects on reading comprehension. When students use these strategies, they pay attention to whether they understand what they are reading and use fix-up strategies such as restating what is happening or rereading parts of the text that do not make sense.

Application in Comprehension Builder

In Activity 4 of the During-Reading Strategies lesson, students practice identifying information from the text that they're unsure of, then use strategies such as rereading, connecting to key words, and activating prior knowledge to clarify their understanding. They also practice the monitoring, clarifying, and fix-up strategies and review what they have learned.

After-Reading Strategies

Rationale / Research Basis

Hougan and Smartt (2020) emphasize that good readers are able to identify information that is most important in a text, pull together key information and explain it in their own words. Answering questions and retelling or summarizing helps students engage more deeply with the text, recognize important concepts, and monitor their own understanding. These activities also help teachers identify areas of weakness. The information they gather from analyzing student performance can be used to inform future comprehension instruction, which is key to improving student achievement.

Application in Comprehension Builder

In the After-Reading Strategies lesson, students learn to employ the evidence-based practices of answering questions and retelling or summarizing.

Note: Section 2 of Comprehension Builder contains additional lessons for answering specific types of comprehension questions and more options for teaching students to retell or summarize what they read.

Answering Questions

Rationale / Research Basis

Vaughn et al. (2022) recommend that students are consistently provided opportunities to ask and answer questions to better understand the text they read so they are better able to interpret the meaning of text. Students also need to learn how to find and justify answers to different types of questions and be provided with the opportunity to collaboratively answer questions with their classmates.

Application in Comprehension Builder

In Activity 1 of the After-Reading Strategies lesson, students read a story and practice finding evidence in the text to answer multiple kinds of questions. They also practice answering questions and reviewing what they have learned.

Retelling and Summarizing

Rationale / Research Basis

Shanahan et al. (2010) found that retelling demonstrates positive effects on reading comprehension. When students retell or summarize what they have read, they briefly describe the main points in their own words, orally or in writing. Summarizing helps students to determine the essential ideas, enables them to focus on key words and phrases, and teaches them how to reduce a text to its main points (Reading Rockets, nd.).

Application in Comprehension Builder

In Activity 2 of the After-Reading Strategies lesson, students use prompts to help them retell or summarize a story using their own words. They also practice retelling and summarizing and reviewing what they have learned.

Question Types

Rationale / Research Basis

Full comprehension involves understanding vocabulary and syntax, accessing background knowledge, making connections, and applying critical reasoning. To truly understand text, readers must be able to approach it from multiple angles—identifying key details, recognizing relationships, evaluating ideas, and summarizing the content and intent. These layers of comprehension give students different ways to interpret and interact meaningfully with what they read.

Students are frequently assessed on their ability to demonstrate these varied aspects of comprehension. Standardized tests, classroom assignments, and academic discussions often rely on carefully constructed questions that target specific angles of understanding. To respond successfully, students must not only apply the necessary reasoning but also navigate the academic language of the questions themselves. Comprehending will also be important throughout the students' lives, outside of and long after their time in school.

For teachers, comprehension questions serve an important dual purpose. They help students practice their application of many components of comprehension, while also providing insight into where students may be struggling.

Application in Comprehension Builder

Section 2 of Comprehension Builder includes lessons that directly teach students how to respond to a variety of comprehension questions, with explicit instruction and ample practice opportunities. Teachers may use these lessons to strengthen students' comprehension skills in preparation for comprehension assessments, or on an as-needed basis to provide targeted support when gaps are identified.

Detail (Literal)

Rationale / Research Basis

In Bloom's Taxonomy (Armstrong, 2010), detail questions belong to the lowest level of learning in the cognitive domain (Remember Level: Recall Facts and Basic Concepts). Knowing the facts and basic concepts presented in a story provides a foundation for students to answer inferential questions and guides them in retelling/summarizing what they have read.

Application in Comprehension Builder

In the Detail (Literal) lesson, students learn how to find the answer to a detail question (also known as a literal question). The lesson teaches students to look "right there" in a story because the answer will be stated directly in the text. Each activity in the lesson provides instruction and practice for answering a different type of detail question: Finding the Answer, Filling in the Blank (cloze), and Putting Events in Order (chronological order/sequencing).

Short Answer

Rationale / Research Basis

Graham et al. (2010) identified writing practices that have been shown to be effective in improving students' reading, explaining that although students can answer questions about a text verbally, there is greater benefit when they respond in writing. Having students write about the texts they read by answering questions in writing is included in their recommendations.

Application in Comprehension Builder

In the Short-Answer lesson, students learn how to construct a response that restates the question. In the first activities, students learn that a good short answer is one where the question that was asked is easily identifiable by reading the answer. Students analyze questions to determine what is being asked, identify key question words and other important words that should be included in their answers, and practice constructing short-answer responses. In the last activity, students practice reading a story and answering a few short-answer questions about it.

Vocabulary

Rationale / Research Basis

A substantial amount of the variance in reading comprehension is attributable to knowing the meanings of individual words (Moats, 2020). Consequently, students should be encouraged to notice and be curious about new words. They need to learn how to figure out the meaning of words from context, how to use resources such as glossaries and dictionaries, and how to build on their understanding of new words by exploring their parts, their synonyms, their antonyms, how they are used, etc. Effective, meaningful vocabulary instruction includes context, student-friendly definitions, and engaging discussions (Hougan and Smartt, 2020). Explicitly teaching and modeling how to find clues in the surrounding sentences helps students determine the meanings of words they do not understand (Vaughn et al., 2022).

Application in Comprehension Builder

In the Vocabulary lesson, students encounter new words in text and learn how to analyze the context to figure out their meanings. Activities include the use of graphic organizers which guide students to look for clues in the surrounding sentences to determine the meaning of unknown words. They also enhance their understanding of new words using glossaries (and possibly dictionaries and/or thesauruses), learning word parts, parts of speech, synonyms and antonyms, engaging in discussion, and applying the words in context. Such analysis helps students comprehend the text and answer questions related to vocabulary, which they also practice in this lesson.

Main Idea

Rationale / Research Basis

To identify the main idea of a story, the reader needs to determine what a story is mostly about—the big or major idea the text is communicating. According to Tim Shanahan (2018), good readers identify these major ideas—the ones that state the point of the text or that are the most repeated or referenced ideas of the text—within paragraphs, sections of texts, and entire texts. Joan Sedita (2024) explains that students should be taught the foundational comprehension strategy of identifying the difference between main ideas and the details that support them, and then stating the main ideas in their own words.

Application in Comprehension Builder

In the Main Idea lesson, students learn how to find the main idea of a story. In the first activity, they learn the difference between key details and main ideas. They use pictures and choose appropriate titles to identify key details and the big picture. In the second activity, students are taught to find the key details in a story and determine the main idea of the passage.

Fact and Opinion

Rationale / Research Basis

Understanding the difference between facts and opinions helps students evaluate text accurately, better understand the author's purpose, and think critically about the meaning of the text. Not only is this skill a key component of state literacy standards (e.g. Minnesota Department of Education, 2020 Minnesota K–12 Academic Standards in English Language Arts), but the ability to determine what is true and what is subjective is vital in order to fully comprehend the articles, texts, and information students encounter on a daily basis. By practicing these skills, students will strengthen their comprehension and build critical thinking skills.

Application in Comprehension Builder

In the Fact and Opinion lesson, students learn how to identify the clues that help them distinguish between factual statements that can be proven vs. opinions that express personal feelings or beliefs. They learn what facts and opinions are, make a list of signal words, and practice distinguishing between facts and opinions with statements and with texts. In addition, the final activity in this lesson, designed for older students (about grade 4 and above), helps students learn to distinguish misinformation from facts and opinions.

Cause and Effect

Rationale / Research Basis

Cause and effect is a common concept included in many individual states' English Language Arts standards (e.g. Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects). Understanding cause and effect helps readers to make connections between events or what happened (effect) and why something happened (cause). When readers understand cause and effect, they deepen their knowledge of the author's purpose and the sequence of events, leading to greater comprehension. Teaching students to identify signal words will support their identification of specific causes and effects within the text and help students understand what happened and why (Knight, Child, 2021).

Application in Comprehension Builder

In the Cause and Effect lesson, students learn how to identify cause and effect. They learn the difference between cause and effect, discuss examples, and play a game matching causes to effects. They also learn about signal words and practice noticing signal words and distinguishing cause and effect in a story.

Compare and Contrast

Rationale / Research Basis

Students need to develop the ability to compare and contrast items, situations, issues, and the texts they read. Cultivating students' capacity to notice and think about similarities and differences helps them comprehend and retain information. Many individual states' English Language Arts standards (e.g. Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects) require that students make comparisons and compare-and-contrast questions often show up on standardized tests. Explicit instruction on the compare-contrast text structure can help students understand this structure and support their comprehension of texts that employ it. This type of instruction can also help students learn the vocabulary that will help them to recognize a compare-contrast structure when they encounter it in the texts that they read. Once students understand this structure, compare-contrast texts can be used to help young students make connections between new content and their own background knowledge and experiences (Dreher and Gray, 2009).

Application in Comprehension Builder

In the Compare and Contrast lesson, students practice noticing, thinking about, and describing the ways in which things are the same and how they differ. They learn about words that signal comparing or contrasting, analyze short texts with a compare-contrast text structure, and try writing some of their own comparison text. They also explore analogies and the relationships between items. In addition, they learn to answer compare-and-contrast questions regarding things discussed within a single story and regarding two stories that are related in some way.

Author's Purpose

Rationale / Research Basis

According to Shanahan (2019), understanding the author's purpose allows a reader to better focus on and comprehend key information (content). Instruction should include teaching students to look for clue or signal words, as these words are important academic vocabulary, and they also help a reader actively make sense of an author's message.

Application in Comprehension Builder

In the Author's Purpose lesson, students learn how to identify and answer questions about the author's purpose. In the earlier activities, the students learn that authors write with a purpose and are introduced to three main types of author's purpose: to persuade, to inform, and to entertain. For each of the three purposes, students create lists of signal words and common real-world examples of where they might find each kind of text. Then they practice reading stories and finding clues to determine the author's purpose. The last activity gives students the opportunity to write with a purpose and identify the author's purpose in their peers' passages.

Graphical Information

Rationale / Research Basis

Graphical information helps us process complex data more effectively by showing trends, patterns, and relationships that might be difficult to discern from text alone. Because we can often comprehend numerical or statistical data more quickly and deeply when it's presented visually, graphical information is common alongside text in articles and books related to science, math, social studies, geography, and statistics (among other topics). The ability to interpret graphical information is commonly found in state standards (e.g. Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects). Roberts et al. (2013) explain that students who know how to decode and interpret graphical elements have a distinct advantage over those who do not. They emphasize that teachers should draw students' attention to the value of graphics in constructing meaning from text and encourage students to carefully analyze and reflect on what they see. Graphical information is also a key feature in reading that students will encounter outside of school, as graphical information often appears alongside text in newspapers, websites, reports, advertisements, and more.

Application in Comprehension Builder

In the Graphical Information lesson, students learn to recognize and interpret graphical information in order to more fully comprehend texts accompanied by such information. The activities found in this lesson emphasize the value of graphical information, teach students about some common types of graphical information (e.g. tables, charts, graphs, timelines, maps, and diagrams), and provide them with practice interpreting graphical information alongside related text.

Making Inferences

Rationale / Research Basis

Inference is a cognitive process that is foundational to higher-order thinking (Marzano, 2010). The ability to make an inference is essential to understanding text passages because authors do not always explicitly state information or explain concepts (Sedita, 2024). Students should be taught to build coherence with inference in order to determine what the text does not directly state, but instead implies (Brookins, 2026).

Application in Comprehension Builder

In the Making Inferences lesson, students learn about making inferences and how new or additional information or clues can adjust their understanding of things. This lesson teaches students that answers to inferential questions are not directly stated in the text of the story. They learn that they need to look for clues and consider what the text says to infer or figure out an answer based on the information the author provides. They also learn how to answer questions by making inferences and have graphic organizers available to support their learning.

Retelling and Summarizing

Rationale / Research Basis

Sedita (2024) explains that identifying main ideas, (sometimes referred to as getting the gist) is an essential first step to summarizing and that stating main ideas and details is essential for retelling, which is a highly effective strategy for primary grades. She further states that being able to pause and identify the main idea, or gist, of a paragraph or longer piece of text is essential for self-monitoring while reading, being able to take notes, and for generating higher-level questions about text. The National Reading Panel (2000) reviewed more than 200 studies on comprehension strategies, and their analysis attributed the largest learning effects to summarizing. Shanahan (2019) explains that summarization instruction is beneficial to a wide range of readers. Graham et al. (2010) identified writing practices shown to be effective in improving students' reading. Included in their recommendations is having students write summaries of a text they have read, which in grades 3–12 showed a consistently positive impact on reading comprehension.

Application in Comprehension Builder

The purposes of the Retelling and Summarizing lesson are to develop students' retelling and summarizing skills, to emphasize the importance of reading for meaning, and to connect reading to writing. The four activity options in this lesson progress from the simplest version of oral retelling—often simply stating something remembered from the story—through developing the ability to write a summary, using gist statements. A variety of organizers are available to support students' learning.

Note: The Retelling and Summarizing lesson activities were designed for students who read fluently enough to justify spending time retelling or summarizing a story. Teachers may select an activity for a student or group of students based on their ability or which stage of retelling or summarizing they need to develop next.

Other Elements of Comprehension

Knowledge Building

Rationale / Research Basis

Duke et al. (2021) note that research demonstrates comprehension strategy instruction and/or text structure instruction need not detract from content learning or knowledge building. In fact, they report that many effective approaches teach comprehension strategy instruction with a knowledge-building context. Sedita (2024) explains that teaching both comprehension strategies and building background knowledge is beneficial to students and teaching both at the same time is the best combination. Research suggests that effective reading comprehension interventions focus on building vocabulary and background knowledge to support the growth and success of struggling adolescent readers (Richmond et al., 2022).

Application in Comprehension Builder

Comprehension Builder was designed to teach comprehension strategies while building background knowledge. Most of the story texts included in Comprehension Builder are nonfiction and knowledge-building, however teachers may also choose to teach the lessons or repeat the lessons using outside texts of their choice.

The Introduction to Comprehension Builder includes a section called *Beyond Comprehension Builder: Strengthening Reading Comprehension Every Day* and one of its subsections is on emphasizing knowledge-building activities. The subsection explains the value of knowledge-building and provides tips for teachers such as incorporating a wide variety of text formats and topics, pairing fictional texts with relevant nonfiction texts or informational videos, creating a class knowledge wall with fun facts, hosting show and tell sessions, and more.

Critical Thinking

Rationale / Research Basis

Gibbons (2026) explains that in the age of artificial intelligence, it is important that students learn how to be critical thinkers and consumers of text. She explains that reading is an act of thinking and in order to make meaning, teachers should engage in conversations with students by asking students before, during and after reading questions to articulate what a text is saying and why it matters. Gibbons suggests practices that support critical thinking in the primary grades, by asking what a text is mostly about and providing sentence frames to support oral explanations. In upper elementary and middle school, she recommends engaging students in discussions that require justification and multiple perspectives, as well as connecting texts to real-world decisions (Gibbons, 2026).

Vocabulary

Rationale / Research Basis

Kamil et al. (2008) recommend teachers provide explicit vocabulary instruction, (by providing students with strategies to make them independent vocabulary learners), and making use of reference materials such as glossaries. The National Center on Improving Literacy (2023) discusses how students learn vocabulary and recommends four steps for providing specific word instruction: select the word, provide a student-friendly definition, illustrate the word, and check students' understanding. They emphasize that vocabulary can be introduced before and during reading to help students learn new words and better comprehend the text.

Application in Comprehension Builder

Throughout all of the lessons, students are engaged in reading as an act of thinking, which requires critical thinking to support reading comprehension. The strategies taught in Section 1 focus specifically on the before, during, after strategies and include activities that engage students in conversation and questions about a text and why it matters. The skills students learn in Section 2 require them to analyze texts, make inferences, evaluate information, and construct meaning beyond the literal level, all which build critical thinking skills. See the information presented above for more information about these lessons.

Application in Comprehension Builder

The story texts included in Comprehension Builder are vocabulary rich. Each story contains key words, bolded vocabulary words, and a glossary with student-friendly definitions for each word, and sample sentences for many. The chosen words were carefully selected for their importance to understanding the text, their usefulness, and level of difficulty. Each story has a corresponding crossword puzzle for extra practice with definitions, synonyms, and antonyms. Teachers are directed to check students' understanding through discussion and checking of answers in each activity. Teachers may also choose to use any outside texts of their choice, allowing for additional opportunities to build vocabulary.

Section 2 of Comprehension Builder includes a Vocabulary specific lesson with a variety of graphic organizers that include defining words, using words in sentences, sketching words, finding the word parts, parts of speech, and identifying synonyms and antonyms of the word. See the Vocabulary section above for more information about that lesson.

Text Structure

Rationale / Research Basis

Joan Sedita (2024) explains that identifying the main idea, or gist, of a paragraph or longer piece of text is an important part of recognizing text structure. According to Reading Rockets (n.d.), text structures can be taught in a variety of ways, including sharing examples of different text structures, using graphic organizers, and teaching signal words. The five most common text structures young readers encounter are description, cause and effect, compare and contrast, chronological/sequence, and problem and solution.

Shanahan (2019) discusses text structure and says that instruction works across a wide range of grade levels, so whether you teach kindergarten, high school, or any of the grades in between there is good reason to believe this would be beneficial. He goes on to say that text structure instruction has been found to be beneficial with English Learners, as well as students with learning disabilities and is a valuable tool for helping kids to demystify challenging texts.

Application in Comprehension Builder

Several Comprehension Builder lessons include activities where students learn about finding the main idea, write gist statements, learn about signal words, and use graphic organizers to better understand texts. The program also includes lessons on cause and effect, compare and contrast, and chronological order.

The Introduction to Comprehension Builder includes a section called *Beyond Comprehension Builder: Strengthening Reading Comprehension Every Day* and one of its subsections is teaching students about text structures. The subsection contains a table with common fiction and nonfiction text structures and provides activity suggestions for each.

Writing

Rationale / Research Basis

Graham et al. (2010) identified writing practices shown to be effective in helping students increase their reading skills and comprehension. These practices include having students:

- write about the texts they read by responding to a text in writing
- taking notes and writing summaries
- answering questions about a text in writing
- creating and answering their own written questions about a text.

Brookins (2026) states that when students retrieve, organize, and express their understanding in writing, their comprehension solidifies. He recommends students be provided with opportunities to construct responses, write summaries and synthesis.

Application in Comprehension Builder

Several Comprehension Builder lessons include writing practices such responding to questions in writing, writing their own questions, and writing predictions, retells, or summaries.

Academic Language

Rationale / Research Basis

Academic vocabulary, including words that occur across multiple contexts as well as discipline-specific terms, helps students acquire new learning strategies and skills (Marzano, 2005, as cited in Sibold, 2011). Baker et al. (2017) emphasize that learning the meaning of academic vocabulary is essential to understanding and applying new content and students must learn that the way language is used in school settings is different from the way it is used in everyday conversations, including how different subjects frequently have their own conventions for communicating academic content. It is especially important that English Learners receive explicit instruction about the academic vocabulary that is necessary for their success in school (Sibold, 2011).

Application in Comprehension Builder

Throughout Comprehension Builder lessons, students encounter, learn about, and use academic vocabulary (e.g., predict, infer, restate, summarize, sequence, compare, contrast, etc.), building the language they need to engage effectively with texts.

The Introduction to Comprehension Builder includes a section called *Beyond Comprehension Builder: Strengthening Reading Comprehension Every Day* and one of its subsections is on incorporating and teaching academic language.

Instructional Components

Explicit Instruction

Rationale / Research Basis

Explicit strategy instruction includes explaining a strategy and the sub-skills involved, modeling how to apply the strategy, engaging students in guided practice, applying strategies in a variety of text types, and eventual independent use in combination with other strategies (Sedita, 2024). The National Reading Panel (2000), along with Shanahan et al. (2010), recommends explicit instruction in comprehension strategies. In addition, Vaughn et al. (2022) recommends that students be explicitly taught how to find and justify answers to different types of questions. Richmond et al. (2024) emphasize that effective comprehension instruction should use consistent instructional routines and principles of explicit instruction, both within a gradual release of responsibility framework.

Application in Comprehension Builder

Comprehension Builder reflects a comprehensive approach to instruction by incorporating several key principles of explicit teaching. Each lesson includes direct explanation, teacher modeling, scaffolded support, gradual release of responsibility, collaborative learning, and frequent opportunities for student response. The program also offers substantial practice, extension opportunities, and differentiation options, enabling teachers to adjust instruction based on student readiness.

Progress Monitoring and Responsive Instruction

Rationale / Research Basis

Monitoring increases student involvement in the learning process and promotes teacher awareness of each student's progress. By communicating goals and expectations, a teacher can increase students' academic achievement (Althoff et al., 2007). In addition, providing students with feedback on their progress toward short- and long-term goals has been shown to increase students' performance (Conte & Hintze, 2000). Progress monitoring rewards students for their efforts by showing evidence of their progress and motivates them to keep reading. When performance data is graphed, both teachers and students can easily monitor progress (Fuchs et al., (1993) ; Fuchs, Fuchs et al., 1991). A validated, data-based process for assessing reading comprehension is inherently complex, because comprehension performance is shaped by many factors. A student's understanding of a text, and their ability to demonstrate that understanding, may be affected by decoding ability, text difficulty, background knowledge, interest, attention, reading stamina, working memory, processing time, and other variables. For that reason, meaningful monitoring of progress in reading comprehension depends heavily on frequent teacher observation, formative assessment, and real-time instructional adjustment.

Application in Comprehension Builder

Each Comprehension Builder lesson contains multiple opportunities for formative assessment. Comprehension Builder's flexible structure allows teachers to make systematic instructional adjustments in the moment and over time through lesson/activity selection, pacing, differentiation options, text selection, scaffolding, and more based on how they observe students are performing.

Comprehension Builder also provides tools to support more tangible progress monitoring. The Question Types Progress Monitoring Graph spreadsheet, for instance, helps teachers collect data that they can use to identify patterns, note areas of strength and need, and get a general sense of how students are responding to specific lessons/activities. This information can then guide responsive instruction, helping teachers determine when to reteach, adjust the level of support, provide additional practice, or move students forward.

Scaffolding/Gradual Release of Responsibility

Rationale / Research Basis

Vaughn et al. (2022) recommend instruction begin with teachers explaining and demonstrating comprehension-building practices and gradually reducing their guidance as students demonstrate they can use the practices independently. Teachers should use a direct and explicit instruction lesson plan to teach students how to use comprehension strategies while providing an appropriate amount of guided practice and communicate about the comprehension strategies while teaching them (Kamil et al., 2008). Richmond et al. (2024) emphasize that effective comprehension instruction should use consistent instructional routines and principles of explicit instruction, both within a gradual release of responsibility framework. Shanahan et al. (2010) also recommend that reading comprehension strategies are taught using a gradual release of responsibility.

Application in Comprehension Builder

The lessons in Comprehension Builder are designed to follow the *I Do, We Do, You Do* model. Teachers are guided to first explain and demonstrate the use of the comprehension strategy and gradually release the responsibility of using the strategies to the students. There are several options described in the activities for the teachers to choose from as they release the responsibility, eventually leading to independent use of the strategy taught.

Frequent Opportunities to Respond

Rationale / Research Basis

Kamil et al. (2008) state the importance of actively involving students during comprehension strategy instruction. When students are provided with frequent opportunities to respond, student engagement increases by focusing them on the content being taught, which leads to higher levels of student motivation (Delaware Positive Behavior Support Project, n.d.). Recommended practices include the teacher providing a direct question or task to all students who are then given an opportunity to respond in unison followed by the teacher providing feedback. McMillan (2018) explains that using discussions to promote student questioning and the exchange of ideas and opinions helps to promote thinking, generate ideas, and solve problems. He adds that questions can efficiently capture students' attention, and that actively thinking through answers to questions enhances students' understanding — while learning is further enhanced when students listen to the responses of their peers (McMillan, 2018). Shanahan et al. (2010) also recommend that teachers guide students through high-quality discussions using questions that require students to think deeply, asking follow-up questions, and having students lead discussions in small groups.

Collaborative Learning

Rationale / Research Basis

Kamil et al. (2008) suggests that teachers provide support for students working in cooperative learning groups. As students are working, the teacher should assist them directly by modeling how to use a given strategy or asking questions to generate ideas about how the student would use the strategy, give students direct answers and have them repeat those answers, gradually reduce the support, perhaps by asking them to break the cooperative learning groups into pairs so they have fewer peers to rely on and reduce the support further by having students use the strategies on their own with texts they read independently. One of the four effective reading comprehension instructional practices identified by Capin is engaging students in text-based collaborative learning (Capin, as cited in Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2024). Brookins (2026) explains that oral discussion supports comprehension by helping students clarify ideas, justify thinking, and refine their understanding. Shanahan et al. (2010) also recommend that students are given the opportunity to learn by collaborating with peers.

Application in Comprehension Builder

The introduction for each lesson in Comprehension Builder begins with an explanation of the strategy being taught and why it is important to comprehension. Active engagement and frequent opportunities to respond are included in all lesson activities, which also include many opportunities for differentiation and suggested options for student response.

Application in Comprehension Builder

Instructional activities throughout Comprehension Builder include options to work in groups, pairs, and individually. Lessons regularly move from teacher demonstration (I do) to guided activity (we do), to group or individual work (you do). The opportunity for discussions also exists throughout the activities with the teacher monitoring and assisting groups in the use of the strategies.

Differentiated Instruction

Rationale / Research Basis

Differentiated instruction adapts lessons to meet the varied needs of students to ensure all students can learn (Marymount University, 2025). Kamil et al. (2008) explain that explicit instruction should involve a sufficient amount of support or scaffolding to ensure students are learning the strategies. Tomlinson et al., (2003) state that, based on theory and research, it is important for teachers to adjust curriculum and instruction and that differentiation must be conceived and practiced as a reflection of educational best practice. They explain that effective differentiation is proactive, not reactive, employs the use of flexible, small teaching-learning groups, uses a variety of materials, has a variable pace, and is knowledge and learner centered.

Ongoing/Distributed Practice

Rationale / Research Basis

Students should be shown how to apply the strategies they are learning to different texts (Kamil et al., 2008). Shanahan et al. (2010) concur, recommending teaching reading comprehension strategies using multiple genres of text and using texts that support the purpose of instruction. Recommendation 4 of the What Works Clearing House Practice Guide *Providing Reading Interventions for Students in Grades 4–9* (Vaughn, et al., 2022) states the importance of providing students with opportunities to practice making sense of stretch text that will expose them to complex ideas and information, recognizing that teacher support is essential when using challenging texts.

Application in Comprehension Builder

Many of the suggestions, strategies, and instructional options provided throughout the Comprehension Builder lessons reflect research-based practices that benefit a wide range of students—including multilingual learners, students with dyslexia and other reading disabilities, neurodivergent students, and students who need additional enrichment or acceleration.

The *Provide Support for Diverse Learners* section in the Introduction to Comprehension Builder also offers specific considerations and suggestions to help teachers provide intentional, targeted support for these students. Further, each activity includes multiple differentiation options, each based on individual student and/or group needs.

Application in Comprehension Builder

Every Comprehension Builder lesson includes a *Beyond the Lesson* section that gives teachers ways to reinforce skills after completing the lesson and within other contexts. In addition, the *Beyond Comprehension Builder: Strengthening Reading Comprehension Every Day* section in the Introduction to Comprehension Builder provides several pages of practical suggestions for embedding reading comprehension instruction and practice throughout the year and across subject areas. These features support teachers in helping students make connections between newly learned skills, previously developed skills, and broader academic tasks.

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