

Using Writing to Develop Reading Comprehension with Beginning Readers*

Instructional emphasis on comprehension skills is essential while beginning readers are developing decoding proficiency. Writing is one of the effective tools to facilitate the development of comprehension. The National Commission on Writing (2006) states:

"If students are to make knowledge their own, they must struggle with the details, wrestle with the facts, and rework raw information and dimly understood concepts into language they can communicate to someone else. In short, if students are to learn, they must write."

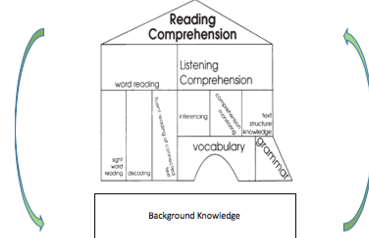
Writing also provides a window on the level of a student's understanding of text, so the student and the teacher can figure out what's missing or misunderstood.

A large-scale review of research on the relationship between reading comprehension and writing led Graham and Hebert (2010) to make three recommendations: Have students write about the texts they read. Teach students the writing skills and processes that go into creating text. And, increase how much students write. We'll explore the first suggestion. But first, some background knowledge!

The Role of Background Knowledge

The Simple View of Reading ($RC = D \times LC$), tells us that Reading Comprehension (RC) is the product of Decoding (D) and Listening/Language Comprehension (LC).

An expanded view of reading



Hogan, Bridges, Justice, & Cain, 2011

Research also indicates that knowledge learning should start early (Elleman and Compton, 2017). Building a store of content knowledge works like compound interest. It grows exponentially. For that reason, the earlier that students add to their database of knowledge the better.

To show the importance of background knowledge (BK), we've incorporated it into the Expanded View of Reading graphic (above), representing background knowledge with a box. The arrows signal that BK and RC share a reciprocity—background knowledge is needed to understand text and reading adds to background knowledge.

Text Types Emerging Readers Listen to and Read

For beginning readers, comprehension can be developed using text students can read themselves *and* text students listen to. **All** types of text afford opportunities to check for understanding. The following table shows the changing characteristics of text students read during the early stages of learning to read.

What Types of Text Do Emerging Readers Read?			
	Text Type Characteristics		
	Stage 0 Predictable	Stage 1 Code-emphasis	Stage 2 Authentic
Text students read	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Syntactic repetition Reliance on pictures Patterns familiar from spoken language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High percentage of text is phonetically predictable Code knowledge for text matches what has been taught 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Words used in text are based on content rather than syntactic or phonetic features
Text students listen to	<p>Authentic (Approximately two grade levels above reading level of students)</p>		

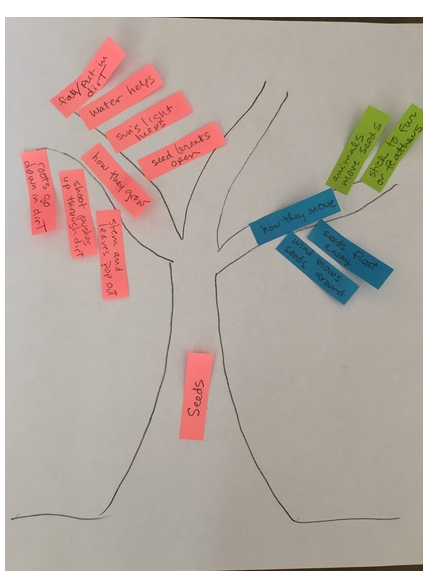
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Adapted from the forthcoming *Comprehension: Knowledge to Practice* in the Literacy How Professional Learning Series.

Writing to promote comprehension can and should be done with any type of text. Listening-level text selections for Stage 1 Code-Emphasis were used in the Knowledge Tree activity illustrated below.

Writing Activities to Develop Comprehension for Emerging Readers

Three activities are well-suited for beginning readers: Writing notes about text, writing sentence summaries about text, and writing answers about text. Let's look more closely at writing notes using an activity we call Knowledge Trees.



From Gillis and Eberhardt's forthcoming book, *Comprehension: Knowledge to Practice*, in the Literacy How Professional Learning Series.

According to Graham and Hebert (2010), note takers don't merely record information, they process and organize it, make connections, and blend in new knowledge with prior ideas to gain new understanding.

Young readers can build Knowledge Trees by first reading or listening to an informational selection, then writing (or watching the teacher scribe) information from the text on small slips of paper. Next, teachers help students sort the information, putting the topic on the trunk, main categories on the branches, and details on the leaves. As the children read or listen to more informational texts on the same topic, they continue to add leaves to their Knowledge Trees by incorporating new information. As the tree grows, so does their understanding of the topic.

Resources

- Elleman, A. M., & Compton, D. L. (2017). Beyond comprehension strategy instruction: What's next?. *Language, speech, and hearing services in schools* 48(2), 84-91.
- Graham, S. & Hebert, M. A. (2010). *Writing to read: Evidence for how writing can improve reading. A Carnegie Corporation Time to Act Report*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.
- Hogan, T.F., Bridges, M.S., Justice, L.M., & Cain, K. (2011). Increasing Higher Level Language Skills to Improve Reading Comprehension. *Focus on Exceptional Children*, Volume 44, Number 3, pp. 1 – 20.
- National Commission on Writing. (2006) *Writing and school reform*. Available at www.collegeboard.com

*Adapted from Eberhardt & Gillis's 10/25/18 presentation at the Annual IDA Conference.



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