

How Can I Help to Improve My Child's Reading Comprehension?

—Two Useful Strategies for Reading at Home—

Understanding is the primary goal of reading. Strong reading comprehension is critical to student success in all subjects. As students move into higher grades, the texts they read become increasingly complex. Upper-grade texts are often dense, packed with important concepts and technical vocabulary. Students need to be aware when their comprehension breaks down and have strategies for learning new information from text.

Parents can help students use comprehension strategies when reading at home. Here are two evidence-based strategies to try.

1. Ask and Answer Questions

When reading at home, prompt your child to ask questions and then answer them.

Asking their own questions about what they are reading helps students to focus on the text. We encourage you to prompt your child to ask questions about what the author is communicating or what the teacher expects your child to learn. For example, you might ask, “What kind of question would your teacher ask about this?” After coming up with a good question, ask your child to answer it using information from the reading.

The table below shows two types of questions to ask. **Narrow questions** focus on details and facts that are directly stated in the text. This is a good starting place. Looking back in the text to answer narrow questions encourages your child to check facts, something that teachers require in class.

As your child becomes comfortable with this process, move on to **wide questions** about the greater meaning of the text. Wide questions require the reader to make inferences by combining pieces of information from different sentences and relating them to a larger topic.

Example Questions	Narrow Questions	Wide Questions
English language arts (Questions based on <i>From the Mixed Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler</i> by E.L. Konigsburg)	Where do Claudia and Jamie go when they run away? How do Claudia and Jamie become interested in the angel statue?	Why were Claudia and Jamie successful in being unnoticed in the museum? Why is Claudia persistent in her search for information on the angel statue?
Science	What energy force keeps the solar system in rotation? What is the largest planet?	How would a change in the temperature of the sun affect the solar system? Why is it difficult for scientists to study the planets and moons in the solar system?

Example Questions	Narrow Questions	Wide Questions
Social studies	Why did President Jefferson send Lewis and Clark to explore the west?	What challenges did Lewis and Clark encounter in getting help from the native tribal chiefs?
	What gifts were exchanged between Lewis and Clark and the Sioux chief?	How did the detailed journals of Lewis and Clark help future exploration?

2. Identify the Main Idea

When reading at home, stop after one or two paragraphs and ask your child to tell you the main idea.

Good readers can state a clear main idea based on the key information in a text. The main idea should capture the “big idea” of the paragraph rather than unimportant details. Students report that it is often difficult to decide what information is important when they read. A strategy to help with this process is called “get the gist.”

Get the Gist Steps

1. Name the “who” or “what” the paragraph or section is mainly about. Prompt your child to complete this step, which helps to focus attention on the content.

2. Identify the most important information about the “who” or “what.” If your child struggles with this step, allow them to look back in the text.

3. Write a gist statement that combines the information in steps 1 and 2. Ask your child to write a “gist statement,” or main idea. The gist statement should be in your child’s own words rather than copied from the text. The gist statement should include only the most important ideas.

Get the Gist Example

One way that elephants help their ecosystems is by eating. As elephants in a forest eat, they create gaps in the vegetation. These gaps allow new plants to grow and create pathways for other animals. In West Africa, forest elephants are the only animals big enough to eat the branches of some large trees. They spread the seeds from these trees through their dung. The dung fertilizes the seeds as they grow into new plants. Many of these trees would disappear without the help of elephants.

Step	Parent	Child
Step 1	“Who or what is the paragraph mainly about?”	“Elephants”
	“Can you be more specific? What type of elephants?”	“Forest elephants in West Africa”
Step 2	“What is the most important information about forest elephants in West Africa?”	They eat vegetation. They make gaps in the forest. The gaps make pathways. They spread seeds. Their dung fertilizes the seeds.”
Step 3	“Write a gist statement using this information.”	“Forest elephants in West Africa help the forest by making room and spreading seeds for new plants.”
Feedback	“This is a great gist statement. It tells who the paragraph is about and what is most important.”	

