

## Instructional Practices for Developing Comprehension

The continuum chart below shows which practices are best for developing children's comprehension through modeling, guiding, and independent practice.

Gradual Release	Instructional Practice	Description
Model	Intentional Read Aloud	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intentional Read Alouds help children develop reading comprehension by building their general and background knowledge, listening comprehension, vocabulary, oral language, and motivation and engagement.</li> <li>During an Intentional Read Aloud, the teacher reads aloud, stopping at selected points to foster partner or whole class discussion about the text.</li> <li>The books for Intentional Read Alouds as well as the stopping points for discussion need to be purposefully and thoughtfully chosen for best results.</li> </ul>
Model/ Guide	Shared Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shared Reading supports comprehension instruction by providing the teacher with opportunities to think aloud and model approaches to understanding a text and problem solve difficult language or content.</li> <li>During a Shared Reading, the teacher and the children read a text together, with the teacher using a projected or posted copy of the text to model her/his thinking or use of strategies. Depending on the purpose of the Shared Reading, the teacher and children may engage in discussion at designated points during the Shared Reading, as in Interactive Read Alouds.</li> <li>Shared Reading also offers opportunities for writing in relation to reading, as children may be asked to do a quick write or other form of response during or after a Shared Reading, in which they address a brief question or write a response to a short prompt or query related to the text.</li> </ul>
Model/ Guide	Whole Class Discussion (Teacher-Led)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Whole class discussions, at their best, orchestrate many voices, interweaving different children's ideas about a text or topic to develop a joint understanding of meaning, which is deeper and broader, than any one child or group of children could arrive at singularly.</li> <li>The form of whole class discussions varies, but many of them like Questioning the Author (QTA), a well-known whole-class discussion routine, involve the teacher and the children querying the text collaboratively—section by section—moving from more specific literal questions, like what the author is trying to say to more general inferential questions, like what the author means by what they say.</li> </ul>

Gradual Release	Instructional Practice	Description
Guide	Close Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Close reading assists with the comprehension of short complex pieces of texts, often no longer than a page or a paragraph, and sometimes as short as a few sentences. By slowing down and focusing closely on the meaning of the language and the syntax in the short piece of text, and calling on children to problem solve and figure out what they can about the text themselves, close reading illuminates difficult passages of text and also builds children's confidence to take on the challenges of such rich passages on their own in the future.</li> <li>• Most forms of close reading, in which a teacher closely analyzes a text with children, usually includes all or some of the following components (Fisher and Frey, 2020):             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Short passages of complex text</li> <li>• Minimal front loading</li> <li>• Rereading</li> <li>• Annotation</li> <li>• Text-dependent questions</li> </ul> </li> <li>• While close reading is usually done whole class, it can also be done in small groups to support differentiation, with some children rereading a passage of complex, whole class text to further support and/or extend their comprehension of the text.</li> </ul>
Guide	Small Group Discussions (Teacher-Led)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Small group discussions allow teachers to differentiate and tailor comprehension instruction to the needs of different children, and to teach children the conversation skills they need to facilitate their own collaborative small group discussions.</li> <li>• Generally in a small group discussion, the teacher and the children discuss a text together, often talking about the meaning, structure, and language of the text, and sometimes using a variety of comprehension strategies to better understand the text.</li> </ul>

Gradual Release	Instructional Practice	Description
Practice	Whole Class Socratic Circles and Seminars (Student-Led)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Whole Class Socratic Circles and Seminars, like well-orchestrated whole class discussions, foster the development of joint understanding as children build on, critique, and extend each other's ideas. Originally, used mostly in high schools and colleges, Socratic Circles and Seminars have been successfully adapted for use in the middle, elementary, and even primary grades, where children, who have been well-prepared through teacher-directed modeling and practice, enjoy working together to build a nuanced, joint understanding of a text or section of text.</li> <li>• The use of Socratic Circles and Seminars evolves gradually in most classes over time, as children move from heavily teacher-directed discussions to more teacher-monitored discussions to largely child-run discussions. Checklists, rubrics, and other forms of self-reflection can be used to gradually improve children's capacity to do Socratic Circles and Seminars more independently.</li> <li>• Most Socratic Circles and Seminars involve the following basic steps:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop questions around a big idea, theme, or concept in a text or set of texts.</li> <li>• Have children record their thoughts about the questions in a reading journal or on sticky notes, paying attention to where in the text they find evidence to answer each question, and possibly annotating the text with additional ideas or thoughts.</li> <li>• Establish ground rules for the discussion, and model how to interact during the discussion, including strategies or sentence stems for responding to and building on others' ideas.</li> <li>• Begin the discussion with one of the questions, and monitor the content and contributions to the discussion, stepping in when necessary to keep the discussion moving and connect ideas.</li> <li>• Decide on a way to provide feedback and reflection on each implementation of a Socratic Circle or Seminar, in order to help children improve their discussions in the future.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Gradual Release	Instructional Practice	Description
Practice	Small Group Collaborative Discussions (Student-Led)	<p>Small group collaborative discussions foster comprehension because when they are working well, they teach children how to use input from others to extend, refine, and re-think their ideas and interpretations of texts, ensuring that they learn how to use reading and talking, in unison, to maximize their understanding of texts.</p> <p>There are a variety of different kinds of student-led small groups, in which children have collaborative discussions together after learning routines for conversing. Three well-known forms of student-led groups are literature circles and reciprocal teaching.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In <b>literature circles</b>, children usually read and annotate the text to be discussed independently, and then meet to discuss the text together, sometimes taking on different assigned roles in the conversation. Literature circles to work best with short pieces of fictional text, such as a chapter of a novel, a short story, or a picture book, but can also be done with informational text, articles, and poetry.</li> <li>In <b>reciprocal teaching</b>, children read a short passage of text together, stopping at designated points to clarify, question, summarize, and predict. Initially, children usually have roles as the clarifier, questioner, summarizer, and predictor, but as children become more familiar with the routine of reciprocal teaching they may jointly decide when at particular stopping points clarifying, questioning, summarizing, or predicting is called for to support comprehension. Reciprocal teaching tends to work best with short passages of informational text and articles, but can also be done with other forms of nonfiction, and even fiction or poetry.</li> <li>In <b>book clubs</b>, children meet to discuss a book or series of books which they have all read or are currently reading, with sessions distributed across chapters as a way of keeping children motivated and socially engaged as they progress through a text for independent reading and/or content-area instruction. Book clubs tend to work well for self-selected independent reading texts, but can also be used more broadly for assigned texts associated with a particular unit or topic.</li> </ul>
Practice	Independent Reading	<p>Independent reading addresses all of the essential threads of comprehension development when it is well-implemented, providing opportunities for a wide range and volume of reading, knowledge-development, vocabulary growth, practice of foundational reading skills, motivation and engagement, and even oral language, when opportunities for partner work, book clubs, or book talks are also built into the classroom independent reading routine.</p> <p>Independent reading usually entails the following components:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Classroom time to self-select and read a large number of books and variety of text.</li> <li>Explicit instruction about what, why, and how readers read.</li> <li>Teacher monitoring and support during the in-class independent reading time.</li> <li>Authentic conversation about what students are reading.</li> </ul> <p>Independent reading also offers an opportunity for practicing writing in relation to reading and writing to learn, as children may be asked to respond to their reading in reading journals or through brief prompts and questions.</p>

## Comprehension Scaffolds

Comprehension scaffolds are the specific tools we use as teachers to scaffold and support children's understanding of complex texts. Comprehension scaffolds should not, however, be the main method or vehicle for fostering comprehension—like the instructional practices—but, rather, are tools we use selectively in the context of the instructional practices to further support and scaffold children's comprehension.

Overuse of comprehension scaffolds can be problematic for two reasons. First, by becoming the sole or even the primary focus of instruction comprehension scaffolds can take children's attention away from focusing on the text itself, and what it generally means. Second, comprehension scaffolds can short-circuit children's laudable and useful attempts to figure out for themselves ways to extract meaning from a text, and may leave them feeling that they always need the crutch of such scaffolds to puzzle out the meaning of what they are reading, when, in fact, they are capable of doing so themselves, without such supports or modelling. In other words, over-use of comprehension scaffolds can prevent children from developing the confidence in their own unique approaches to understanding texts, which comes from the independent trial and error of interpreting difficult passages on one's own. That said, selective and purposeful use of comprehension scaffolds still has a place in effective comprehension instruction when used to introduce children to new ways of grasping the meaning of what they are reading, but not as an always present and inflexibly required step in thinking about texts. When comprehension scaffolds have been overused, it will be obvious to an observant teacher, who will likely notice children unwilling to make their own original surmises, or take their own bold "leaps" to figure out, unassisted, what a text means.

The table below shows how the five comprehension scaffolds described in the Comprehension Overview might fit into a gradual release model in relation to the instructional practice.

Gradual Release	Instructional Practice	Comprehension Scaffolds	Description
Model	Think Aloud	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Comprehension Strategies</li> <li>Rereading</li> <li>Text Structures</li> </ul>	Teacher reads a text aloud, stopping at selected points to explain or describe their thinking, which may include the use of comprehension strategies, rereading, or the development of an awareness of text structures.
Model and Guide	Shared Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Comprehension Strategies</li> <li>Rereading</li> <li>Text Structures</li> <li>Reading Guides</li> <li>Annotation</li> </ul>	As the teacher and children read a text together, the teacher stops at selected points to explain or describe their thinking, which may include the use of comprehension strategies, rereading, or the development of an awareness of text structures. Similarly, a teacher may show children how to use a reading guide during Shared Reading. Throughout the Shared Reading, children have a chance to try out and contribute to whatever comprehension scaffold is being modeled and explained as the teacher guides them.
Model and Guide	Teacher-Led Small Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Comprehension Strategies</li> <li>Rereading</li> <li>Text Structures</li> <li>Reading Guides</li> <li>Annotation</li> </ul>	Teacher models, explains, and guides small groups of children in the application of one or more comprehension scaffold.

Gradual Release	Instructional Practice	Comprehension Scaffolds	Description
Practice	Student-Led Small Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Comprehension Strategies</li> <li>Rereading</li> <li>Text Structures</li> <li>Reading Guides</li> <li>Annotation</li> </ul>	Children collaboratively use one or more of the comprehension scaffold(s) together. This kind of grouping could occur after a whole class demonstration (Shared Reading/Writing, think aloud) where the teacher wanted children to practice applying the comprehension(s) scaffolds together before practicing them independently to make sure they understood how to do them. Alternatively, student-led small groups may be an ongoing routine for using comprehension scaffolds, as they are with reciprocal teaching, where children learn to work together to apply the strategies of clarifying, questioning, summarize, and predict.
Practice	Independent Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Comprehension Strategies</li> <li>Rereading</li> <li>Text Structures</li> <li>Reading Guides</li> <li>Annotation</li> </ul>	Children apply one or more of the comprehension scaffolds to their reading on their own or with the help of a partner, often using reading journals to keep track of their work and thoughts.

**Note:** The resources provided are for informational purposes only. All resources must meet the New Jersey Department of Education's (NJDOE) accessibility guidelines. Currently, the Department aims to conform to Level AA of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1). However, the Department does not guarantee that linked external sites conform to Level AA of the WCAG 2.1. Neither the Department of Education nor its officers, employees or agents specifically endorse, recommend or favor these resources or the organizations that created them. Please note that the Department of Education has not reviewed or approved the materials related to the programs.