Reading Comprehension: Asking the Right Questions

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From the primary grades through secondary school and beyond, there is a standard procedure for making sure that students have understood what they have read: Teachers ask comprehension questions. These questions are usually phrased so as to review points and tap different levels of thinking—notably, the literal level (recalling the explicit), the interpretive level (grasping the implicit), and the evaluative level (making judgments).

There are two drawbacks to this ubiquitous procedure. First, the nature and the timing of the questions cause this follow-up activity to function more as an oral examination than as an occasion for developing understanding. Second, in an attempt to stimulate thinking at different levels, teachers often pose unnecessary questions (for example, questions that require interpretation but are based on relatively unimportant information). Because of these drawbacks, the standard question-and-answer routine often detracts from, rather than enhances, thinking and comprehension. An example, using narrative text, will illustrate my point. Assume that students have read the first part of a story titled "The Three Spinsters":

> *Once upon a time a poor woman lived with her daughter in a stone cottage not far from the queen's castle. The daughter was lazy and would not spin, and her lack of industry constantly annoyed the mother. One day, the mother lost her patience entirely and came at her daughter with a broomstick. The maiden cried out loudly.*
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> *The queen happened to be driving by in a golden coach pulled by six white horses. When the queen heard the cries, she ordered her coachman to stop, swept into the house, and demanded to know why the mother was beating her daughter.*
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> *The woman was ashamed to admit to having such a lazy daughter, so she said, "Oh, your majesty, I cannot keep the girl from spinning! She is always at the wheel, and I cannot afford all the flax that she demands daily!"*
>
> *"Well," said the queen, "I love the sound of a spinning wheel, and I have a fine supply of flax. Let me take the girl to my castle. She shall live in comfort and shall spin there to her heart's content."*
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> *The mother agreed at once to this plan, and so the maiden returned to the castle with the queen. There, the queen led her to three rooms, each filled to the ceiling with bundles of flax.*
>
> *"Now," said the queen, "you shall spin this flax for me. When you are finished, you shall have my eldest son for a husband. I know you are poor, but your industry is dowry enough. Would that more were like you, my dear!"*

The usual follow-up activity would include such questions as these:

- Why was the mother upset with her daughter? (Literal)
- How did the mother punish the girl? (Literal)
- Why did the queen stop at the poor woman's house? (Interpretive)
- In what was the queen traveling? (Literal)
- Why did the mother lie to the queen? (Literal)
- Did the mother do the right thing in sending her daughter with the queen? (Evaluative)
- How did the girl probably feel when the queen showed her the rooms of flax? (Interpretive)

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These questions may stimulate thinking at different levels, but the number of acceptable responses is limited. Several questions have only one right answer; responses for the others may vary, but only within a narrow range. So this question-and-answer session amounts to a thinly disguised test, not a true exchange of ideas.

Furthermore, because this "test" emphasizes relatively unimportant information, the interaction between the teacher and the students is decidedly hollow. It does not really matter how the mother was punishing the girl or how the queen arrived at the cottage. It is not even essential that readers infer why the queen ordered her coachman to stop or that readers imagine how the girl felt on arriving at the castle. Whether or not the mother acted rightly is an interesting question, but even this moral issue is beside the point.

The point is that the girl is in a tight fix, with no help in sight. Thus the overriding question becomes: How will the girl get out of her predicament? This question requires readers to anticipate what might happen next, in light of what has already occurred. Such speculation changes the tone of the discussion significantly. The question has no one right answer; there are several plausible answers, each of which has merit. As students consider the various possibilities, they think and comprehend more deeply than when they are asked the usual "comprehension" questions.

One teacher stopped a group of readers at this point in the story, asking them to predict what would happen next and to give reasons to support their predictions. Citing the story's title as the reason, the students all said that they expected three spinsters to appear. But they had differing ideas on how and why these characters would enter the story. Those ideas can be summarized as follows.

1. The mother is probably having second thoughts about what she said. After all, she treated the girl harshly by beating her with a broomstick, and she lied to the queen. The mother will sneak three spinsters into the castle to help the girl.

2. The girl will tell the queen the truth and beg for help. The queen seems to be a kindly woman; she stopped, on hearing the girl's cries, and she offered the girl a comfortable life in the castle. So the queen will probably be. understanding, but she will want to teach the girl a lesson. The queen will send in three spinsters, all hard taskmasters who will make the girl work.

3. The girl will find three spinsters in the castle to help her secretly. That way, the work will be done without the queen's discovering the girl's laziness, and she will win the prince.

To justify their predictions, the students recalled specific facts from the story, made inferences, and passed judgments. Their thinking spanned a range of levels, and they reviewed the events of the story in detail. But they were not answering questions that required only isolated bits of thinking. Instead, they were putting all the pieces together, with each group member contributing an opinion and supporting arguments. In the process, the students placed information from the story in proper perspective: as raw data that could be used to form hypotheses about how the girl might solve her problem. The teacher did not judge the rightness of their answers in terms of the actual outcome of the story, but rather in terms of the quality of reasoning that the students displayed.

To continue the story:

> *Distraught, the maiden paced back and forth. If she lived to be 100, she could never spin all that flax! Not knowing what else to do, she sat in the window and began to cry. Three strange women were passing by. One had a broad, flat foot; the second had a large lip that hung down over her chin; the third had an*

enormous thumb. They stopped and called to the maiden, "What ails you, my dear?"

The girl explained her problem. The women agreed to help her, on one condition. They said, "Will you promise to invite us to your wedding, introduce us as your cousins, and ask us to sit at your table and share your food?"

The maiden agreed gladly, and the odd women came in at once and began to work. The first drew out the flax and worked the treadle with her broad foot. The second moistened the thread with her large, protruding lip. The third twisted the thread with her gigantic thumb and rapped with her fingers on the table. Each time she rapped, there fell a heap of beautifully spun flax. And so they worked, deftly threading, licking, and twisting, day after day.

When the queen came to the spinning rooms, the maiden hid the women from sight and showed off the finished bundles as if they were her own work. The spinsters continued to work diligently until all the flax was spun. Then they took their leave, saying to the girl, "Do not forget what you promised, child!"

When the queen saw the completed work, she began at once to plan for the wedding. The prince rejoiced at the prospect of having such a clever and diligent wife.

The queen came one day to discuss the guest list and to ask what names the bride wished to add. The queen had invited noble families, wealthy merchants, and kings and queens from neighboring lands. The maiden thought of how the three women would took amid such elegant company.

At this point, a teacher might ask students to pause once again in their reading to discuss the story. Typical questions would include:

- What was odd about how the three women looked? (Literal)
- What did the girl have to promise? (Literal)
- Was the bargain a fair one? (Evaluative)
- Why did the spinsters want to come to the wedding? (Evaluative)
- How did the girl probably feel about having her work done for her? (Interpretive)
- Why did she hide the women from the queen? (Interpretive)
- Whom did the queen invite to the wedding? (Literal)

Again, such questions divert attention from the critical issue: Will the girl invite the spinsters to her wedding? Young readers who were asked this question proffered the predictions and supporting arguments summarized below.

1. The girl will invite them. She is grateful for their help and will keep her promise in full. Besides, people will not dare to question the actions of a princess at her own wedding. She will do the right thing at last, and the story will have a happy ending. That's the way it goes in fairy tales.

2. The girl will not invite them. She has already shown herself to be not only lazy, but deceitful. To avoid embarrassment, she will go back on her promise. Since the women finished the spinning very quickly and seemed to use magic, they are probably witches. They will put a spell on the girl—or perhaps put her in a dungeon and make her spin for a long time. The prince will come to save her, and that will be the happy ending.

Given the available evidence, each train of thought is justifiable. The more that young readers argued the pros and cons of their predictions, however, the deeper they delved into the story. To support their viewpoints, they reminded one another of

specific details, and they carefully considered nuances of meaning. A clear comprehension of story elements made high-level reasoning possible. At the same time, the need to reason enhanced the students' comprehension.

And so to the story's ending, since readers are no doubt as curious as the student readers were.

> *"I have three cousins," said the girl, "who have always been kind to me. May I invite them?"*
>
> *"Certainly, my dear," said the kindly queen.*
>
> *And so the three strange women came to the wedding, and the girl greeted them warmly, introduced them as her cousins, and had them eat with her at the wedding table. The prince was surprised and wondered how his lovely bride could have such strange-looking relatives. He asked the first how she got such a broad, flat foot. "From treading!" said the first.*
>
> *He asked the second how she got such a large, protruding lip. "From licking!" said the second.*
>
> *He asked the third how she got such an enormous thumb. "From twisting!" said the third.*
>
> *The prince was appalled. He proclaimed that from then on his beautiful bride should never again touch a spinning wheel. And so the girl escaped from that tiresome work once and for all.*

This tale from the collection of the Brothers Grimm (retold here in skeletal form) has been used with a number of readers at different grade levels. The responses that I have described above are representative.

Typically, when students give the expected answers to follow-up questions such as those I have listed above, their teachers assume that they comprehend what they have read. Yet correct answers to such questions do not necessarily reflect either good comprehension or careful thinking. A student may accurately recall details or appropriately interpret them without understanding the significance of this information in context—and without even considering the many implications.

A better approach to comprehension requires students to use information from the text to make logical predictions about outcomes. Students who do this kind of reading and discussing are actually engaged in problem solving, which is considerably more challenging and interesting than playing the Right Answer Game.

The interaction within a group improves when the discussion focuses on predictions. No longer do students listen and respond only to the teacher. Instead, they build on one another's ideas and evaluate one another's contributions in terms of the evidence presented in the text. This open exchange of ideas leads not only to better reasoning and comprehension but also to growing skill in presenting opinions and debating issues.

Moreover, once youngsters begin to argue the merits of various predictions, their curiosity about the actual outcome prods them to read further. Self-motivation, springing from a need for closure, is more compelling than external motivation, springing from a teacher's directives.

Since few commercially available instructional materials are designed for this questioning strategy, the teacher plays an important role. He or she must identify one or two major turning points in each story and use these as discussion starters. During the discussions, the teacher must encourage disagreement (sometimes playing devil's advocate) and must press students to use evidence from the text to justify their

predictions. Of course, the teacher must be careful not to hint at the story's actual outcome. The goal is to elicit good reasoning, not to channel thinking in a "right" direction.

Once the outcome is known, students can reflect on the story. This is the time for raising questions that are interesting but of peripheral importance to the story line (for example, Did the mother do the right thing in sending her daughter with the queen?). Such story features as vocabulary and literary devices can be brought into the lesson at this point and on succeeding days.

A questioning strategy that focuses on prediction is a powerful tool for developing and enhancing comprehension at all grade levels. This strategy calls forth the rigorous thinking that is often lacking in classrooms today. We should not be satisfied to require less of our students.

Further Reading

For further information on prediction strategies (including their applications to expository text), see:

Hammond, W.D. "How Your Students Can Predict Their Way to Reading Comprehension." *Learning* (November 1983)

Nessel, D.; Jones, M.; and Dixon, C. *Thinking Through the Language Arts*. Macmillan, 1989.

Stauffer, R.G. *Directing the Reading-Thinking Process*. Harper & Row, 1975.

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