

IMPROVING READING COMPREHENSION

PREP SCHOLAR.COM, Posted by Courtney Montgomery | Jun 25, 2016

What Is Reading Comprehension?

Reading comprehension is **the understanding of what a particular text means and the ideas the author is attempting to convey, both textual and sub-textual.**

In order to read any text, your brain must process not only the literal words of the piece, but also their relationship with one another, the context behind the words, how subtle language and vocabulary usage can impact emotion and meaning behind the text, and how the text comes together as a larger, coherent whole.

How to Improve Reading Comprehension: 3 Steps

Because reading comprehension is a skill that improves like any other, you can improve your understanding with practice and a game plan.

Dedicate yourself to engaging in a combination of both "guided" and "relaxed" reading practice for at least two to three hours a week. Guided practice will involve structure and focused attention, like learning new vocabulary words and testing yourself on them, while relaxed practice will involve merely letting yourself read and enjoy reading without pressure for at least one to two hours a week. (Note: if you already read for pleasure, add at least one more hour of pleasure-reading per week.)

By combining reading-for-studying and reading-for-pleasure, you'll be able to improve your reading skill without relegating reading time to the realm of "work" alone. Reading is a huge part of our daily lives, and improving your comprehension should never come at the cost of depriving yourself of the pleasure of the activity.

So what are some of the first steps for improving your reading comprehension level?

Step 1: Understand and Reevaluate How You're Currently Reading

Before you can improve your reading comprehension, you must first understand how you're currently reading and what your limitations are.

Start by selecting excerpts from different texts with which you are unfamiliar or any *kind* of text you feel you particularly struggle to understand and read them as you would normally. **As you read, see if you can notice when your attention, energy, or comprehension of the material begins to lag.**

If your comprehension or concentration tends to lag after a period of time, start to slowly build up your stamina. For instance, if you continually lose focus at the 10-minute mark every time you read, acknowledge this and push yourself to *slowly* increase that time. Begin by reading for your maximum amount of focused time and then give yourself a break. Next time, try for 12 minutes. Once you've mastered that, try for 15 and slowly increase up to 30 minutes or more. Improvement comes with time, and it'll only cause frustration if you try to rush it all at once.

Alternatively, you may find that your issues with reading comprehension have less to do with the time spent reading than with the source material itself. Perhaps you struggle to comprehend the essential elements of a text, the context of a piece, character motivation, textbooks with densely packed information, or material that is heavily symbolic. If this is the case, then be sure to follow the tips below to improve these areas of reading comprehension weakness.

Step 2: Improve Your Vocabulary

Reading and comprehension rely on a combination of vocabulary, context, and the interaction of words. So you must be able to understand each moving piece before you can understand the text as a whole.

If you struggle to understand specific vocabulary, it's sometimes possible to pick up meaning through context clues (how the words are used in the sentence or in the passage), but it's always a good idea to look up the definitions of words with which you aren't familiar.

In order to retain your vocabulary knowledge, you must practice a combination of practiced memorization (like studying flashcards you make) and make a point of *using* these new words in your verbal and written communication.

Step 3: Read for Pleasure

The best way to improve your reading comprehension level is through practice. And the best way to practice is to have fun with it!

This will motivate you to engage with the text and embrace the activity as part of your daily life (rather than just your study/work life). As you practice and truly engage with your reading material, improvement will come naturally.

Begin by reading texts that are slightly below your age and grade level (especially if reading is frustrating or difficult for you). This will take pressure off of you and allow you to relax and enjoy the story.

If you enjoy yourself and give it your best shot, you'll find that your reading comprehension levels will improve over time.

Reading Comprehension Tips

Improving your vocabulary and increasing the amount of time you spend reading overall will help you to improve your reading comprehension over time, but what do you do to help you to comprehend a particular piece of text?

Tip 1: Stop When You Get Confused and Try to Summarize What You Just Read

As you read, let yourself stop whenever you lose focus or feel confused. Just stop. Now, without re-reading, **summarize aloud or in your head what you've comprehended so far** (before the place where you became confused).

Skim back through the text and compare how you've summarized it with what's written on the page. Do you feel you've captured the meaningful points? Do you feel a little more focused on what's going on now that you've put the material into your own words?

Keep reading with your summation in mind and let yourself stop and repeat the summarizing process whenever the piece becomes confusing to you.

The more you're able to re-contextualize the work in your own words, the better you'll be able to understand it and lock the information in your mind as you keep reading.

I do this regularly I do this sometimes I never/rarely do this

Tip 2: If You're Struggling, Try Reading Aloud

Sometimes, we can form a sort of "mental block" that can halt our reading progress for whatever reason (maybe the sentence looks complex or awkward, maybe you're tired, maybe you feel intimidated by the word choice, or are simply bored).

Reading these problematic passages aloud can often help circumvent that block and help you to form a visual of what the text is trying to convey.

I do this regularly I do this sometimes I never/rarely do this

Tip 3: Re-read (or Skim) Previous Sections of the Text

For the most part, reading is a personal activity that happens entirely in your head. So don't feel you have to read just like anyone else if "typical" methods don't work for you. Sometimes it can make the most sense to read (or re-read) a text out of order.

It is often helpful to glance backwards through a piece of text (or even re-read large sections) to remind yourself of any information you need and have forgotten--what happened previously, what a particular word means, who a person was...the list is endless.

Previous sentences, sections, or even whole chapters can provide helpful context clues. Re-reading these passages will help to refresh your memory so that you can better understand and interpret later sections of the text.

I do this regularly I do this sometimes I never/rarely do this

Tip 4: Skim or Read Upcoming Sections of the Text

Just like with the previous step, don't feel that the only way to read and understand a text is to work through it completely linearly. Allow yourself the freedom to take apart the text and put it back together again in whichever way makes the most sense to you.

Sometimes a current confusion in a work will be explained later on in the text, and **it can help you to know that explanations are upcoming or even just to read them ahead of time.**

So skip forward or backwards, re-read or read ahead as you need to, take the piece in whatever order you need to in order to make sense of the text. Not everyone thinks linearly, and not everyone best understands texts linearly either.

I do this regularly I do this sometimes I never/rarely do this

Tip 5: Discuss the Text With a Friend (Even an Imaginary Friend or Yourself)

Sometimes discussing what you know so far about a text can help clear up any confusion. If you have a friend who hasn't read the text in question, then explain it to them in your own words. Even if no one else is in the room, **trying to teach or discuss what a passage says or means with "someone else" can be extremely beneficial.** In fact, software engineers call this technique "rubber duck debugging," wherein they explain a coding problem to a rubber duck. This forces them to work through a problem aloud, which has proven time and time again to help people solve problems. So if a piece of text has your head spinning from trying to work through it by yourself, start chatting with your nearest friend/pet/rubber duck. You'll be surprised with how much easier it is to understand a text once you've talked it through with someone.

I do this regularly I do this sometimes I never/rarely do this