



Understanding Reading

Understanding Reading

The need to continue to teach reading as students move up the grade levels and encounter increasingly complex academic material and tasks is now widely recognized. The list below identifies important understandings *about* reading that are described in the sections that follow.

About Reading

Students often confuse reading with saying words on a page. Reading is actually a complex problem-solving process that readers can learn. The following characteristics of reading are described in this document:

- Reading is a complex process.
- Reading is problem solving.
- Fluent reading is not the same as decoding.
- Reading proficiency varies with situation and experience.
- Proficient readers share some key characteristics.

Reading is a Complex Process

Think for a moment about the last thing you read. A student essay? A school bulletin? A newspaper analysis of rising conflict in another part of the world? A report on water quality in your community? A novel? If you could recapture your mental processing, you would notice that you read with reference to a particular world of knowledge and experience related to the text. The text evoked voices, memories, knowledge, and experiences from other times and places—some long dormant, some more immediate. If you were reading complex text about complex ideas or an unfamiliar type of text, you were working to understand it. Your reading was most likely characterized by many false starts and much backtracking. You were probably trying to relate it to your existing knowledge and understanding. You might have stumbled over unfamiliar words and found yourself trying to interpret them from the context. And you might have found yourself having an internal conversation with the author, silently agreeing or disagreeing with what you read.

As experienced readers read, they begin to generate a mental representation, or gist, of the text, which serves as an evolving framework for understanding subsequent parts of the text. As they read further, they test this evolving meaning and monitor their understanding, paying attention to inconsistencies that arise as they interact with the text. If they notice that they are losing the meaning as they read, they draw on a variety of strategies to readjust their understandings. They come to texts with purposes that guide their reading, taking a stance toward the text and responding to the ideas that take shape in the conversation between the text and the self.

While reading a newspaper analysis of global hostilities, for example, you may silently argue with its presentation of “facts,” question the assertions of the writer, and find yourself revisiting heated debates with friends over U.S. foreign policy. You may picture events televised during earlier wars. Lost in your recollections, you may find that even though your eyes have scanned several paragraphs, you have taken nothing in, so you reread these passages, this time focusing on analysis.

Reading is Problem Solving

Reading is not a straightforward process of lifting words off the page. It is a complex process of problem solving in which the reader works to make sense of a text not just from the words and sentences on the page but also from the ideas, memories, and knowledge evoked by those words and sentences. Although at first glance reading may seem to be passive, solitary, and simple it is in truth active, populated by a rich mix of voices and views—those of the author, of the reader, and of others the reader has heard, read about, and otherwise encountered throughout life.



Understanding Reading

Fluent Reading is Not the Same as Decoding

Skillful reading does require readers to carry out certain tasks in a fairly automatic manner. Decoding skills—quick word recognition and ready knowledge of relevant vocabulary, for example—are important to successful reading. However, they are by no means sufficient, especially when texts are complex or otherwise challenging.

Yet many discussion about struggling readers confuse decoding with fluency. Fluency derives from the reader's ability not just to decode or identify individual words but also to quickly process larger language units. In our inquires into reading—our own and that of our students—we have seen that fluency, like other dimensions of reading, varies according to the text at hand. When readers are unfamiliar with the particular language structures and features of text, their language-processing ability breaks down. This means, for example, that teachers cannot assume that students who fluently read narrative or literary texts will be equally fluent with informational texts or primary source documents.

Fluency begins to develop when students have frequent opportunities to read texts that are accessible for them because the vocabulary, the concepts, or both are reasonably familiar. English learners rapidly gain new English vocabulary when reading about familiar situations in the new language. Similarly, readers with dyslexia can tackle complex texts about topics in which they are avidly interested and about which they are knowledgeable. Multiple rereadings of more difficult, less accessible texts help broaden a reader's fluency—as can, perhaps surprisingly, slowing down by chunking a text into smaller units. Of even more importance, fluency grows as readers have opportunities, support, and encouragement to read a wide range of text types about a wide range of topics.

Reading Proficiency Varies with Situation and Experience

Literacy practices—how one engages with text, the type of texts read, the outcomes expected—are shaped by social purposes. As we move from one social situation to another, we learn varied ways of reading and distinct literacy practices linked to specific social activities. Moreover, our experiences vary from one person to another. A person who understands one type of text is not necessarily proficient at reading all types. An experienced reading of mathematical proofs may be perplexed when asked to make sense of a metaphor in a poem. A nursing student may be able to decipher the meanings conveyed by complex anatomical diagrams but feel completely at sea when trying to read a legal brief. A good reader of a motorcycle repair manual can make sense of directions that might stump an English literature professor, but she may be unable to comprehend a student's chemistry text. And a chemistry teacher may feel completely insecure when trying to understand some of the primary sources on a history colleague's course reading list.

In other words, reading is influenced by situational factors, among them the experiences readers have had with particular kinds of texts and reading for particular purposes. And just as so-called good or proficient readers do not necessarily read all texts with equal ease or success, a so-called poor or struggling reader will not necessarily have a hard time with all texts. That said, researchers do know some things about those readers who are more consistently effective across a broad range of texts and text types.



Understanding Reading

Proficient Readers Share Some Key Characteristics

Different reading researchers emphasize different characteristics of good or proficient readers. However, widespread agreement has emerged in the form of a set of key habits. The following key habits of good readers are widely recognized by literacy researchers.

Good readers are

- Mentally engaged
- Motivated to read and to learn
- Persistent in the face of challenge
- Socially active around reading tasks
- Strategic in monitoring the interactive processes that assist comprehension:
 - Setting goals that shape their reading processes
 - Monitoring their emerging understanding of texts
 - Reasoning with texts in valued and discipline-specific ways
 - Coordinating a variety of comprehension strategies to control the reading process