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## Reading Comprehension 101



by Jane Oh

So, your child's got reading down pat. Right? He can recognize complex words, read sentences fluidly, and, for the most part, he can put it all together. But as texts get more and more complicated, reading for comprehension is the name of the game. And that means learning to decode increasingly figurative language and oblique messages.

But that doesn't mean you should set your young reader on Tolstoy just yet. Text comprehension skills can be practiced by as simple an activity as interpreting illustrations or considering metaphors.

One way that authors influence readers' perspective is through the use of pictures. A good way to get your child started on reading for comprehension is to have him closely observe the pictures in an illustrated chapter book before reading the text. Ask your child to pay particular attention to the way the illustrator portrays the characters through the drawings. Consider specific features such as:

- facial expression of the characters
- characters' body language
- proximity of the characters to one another
- use of color

Have your child tell you how she feels as she looks at the pictures. Do the pictures tell a bright, happy story? Or do they paint a grim or sad picture? What do the characters look like they are experiencing? What about time period? Location? Sometimes, a picture can be worth a thousand words, so encourage your child to extract as much information as possible from the illustrations before proceeding to the next step. This is great practice for using the similar evaluations for written text.

Next, have your child read the text on the page. Afterwards, ask him if the descriptions, language and tone of the text are consistent with the message conveyed in the pictures. If not consistent, probe further to

determine why he thinks so.

Figurative language in the text can be just as telling as illustrations - just a bit harder to decipher at first. Through figurative language, like simile, metaphor, hyperbole, and personification, writers describe things through the use of unusual comparisons and exaggerations to portray strong or complex messages, or sometimes to humorous effect. The result of using this technique is the creation of interesting images in our minds. Consider these examples below:

- Mile-high ice-cream cones
- She sings at the top of her lungs.
- Her hair was silk.
- The sun is like a yellow ball of fire in the sky.

Ask your child to describe the images that come to mind when he hears these figures of speech. What message is the author trying to convey with these phrases? Is it an image of intensity? Color? Is it funny, or surprising? Encourage your child to find other examples of figurative language in books, newspapers and magazines, and to think about the image or impression that they make. Not only will he be exploring the wide and wonderful possibilities that language holds, he will also be developing key reading comprehension skills that will last a lifetime.

Jane Oh has taught both third and fourth grade for eight years, working with a diverse student population. She also writes teacher textbook guides.

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