I Read It, but I Don't Get It
Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers

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Foreword by Ellin Oliver Keene

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Fix It!

When I get stuck, I quit reading.

Frankness like Luke’s surprises me. Is he lazy, or does he quit reading because he doesn’t know how to help himself? “Luke,” I ask, “why don’t you try to get unstuck?”

Without hesitating, he answers, “Because nothing I try helps me. Rereading is a waste of time.”

“Try another fix-up strategy then.”

“What’s a fix-up strategy?” he wants to know.

“A fix-up strategy,” I tell him, “is something you use to help yourself get unstuck when you are reading confusing text.”

This time, Luke pauses before he answers. “When I was younger, I used to try sounding words out but that didn’t really help.”

“Did you learn to do anything else?”

“No, not really.”

“Hmm.” I survey the faces in the room and ask, “Does anyone else have a strategy he or she could suggest to Luke?”

“I don’t do anything,” brags Kayla.

“You don’t do anything?” I ask.

“Nöpe, I keep reading and hope it makes sense when I am done.”

“And what if it doesn’t?”

“Then, oh well.”

A sense of panic washes over me, as I realize these kids don’t care whether their reading makes sense or not. When it doesn’t, they simply quit. I realized long ago that most struggling readers weren’t going to love reading enough to choose it as a leisurely pastime. However, electing to quit when text becomes difficult is a choice that could have serious consequences. In a few short years, these students will be on their own. They will have to read apartment leases, car-loan contracts, income tax forms, and material associated with their jobs. It’s one thing to quit reading a chapter out of a textbook and fail a test. It’s quite a different matter to quit reading an income tax form and miss out on a refund. Automatically abandoning a text because it doesn’t make sense is going to make life for a struggling reader even more difficult.
Rereading is Only the Beginning

Upon further investigation, I learn that many students have tried to help themselves repair confusion. Unfortunately, their plans aren’t very strategic. Jenny, a freshman with perfect nails, is required by her father to read ten pages of something every night. She claims that when she reads, she becomes sleepy. In order to get through the ten pages, Jenny polishes one fingernail per page. She is motivated to stay awake because if she doesn’t, the polish will nick and she will have to start over.

Mark claims he rereads everything one hundred times. Amber tells the class that when she gets stuck she looks over the assignment and “tries to figure it out.” Brandon says he thinks about his background knowledge, then rereads. If that doesn’t work, he quits. I’m not sure Brandon truly understands how to use fix-up strategies. I suspect he’s parroting comments I’ve made in class.

Everyone in my classes seems to know how to reread. However, several admit they seldom do it, because they are slow readers and it would take too long. Others say they are lucky to get through an assignment once, let alone read something again. Some students suggest asking for help. When I ask from whom they could get help, they say, “The teacher.” But most adolescents are expected to do their school reading at home. Since teachers aren’t around when students do the majority of their reading, asking the teacher for help is an ineffective plan.

Other kids reveal that when they get stuck, they think harder. I know that strategy. It was taught to me by my fifth-grade teacher, who should have retired five years earlier. We were doing fractions and I was struggling to learn how to find common denominators.

After many incorrect attempts, I decided to ask for help. My teacher kneeled down beside my desk and through clenched teeth said, “Think harder!” As she watched me work, I did think harder. I thought how bad her coffee breath smelled, how much I hated math, and how I would wait until I got home to ask for help. Thinking harder about something I didn’t understand in the first place wasn’t really a strategy I could sink my teeth into. Neither can my students.

Strategies to “Fix Up” Confusion

The next morning, Amber saunters into the room and asks a question that is music to my ears: “What are we supposed to do when we get stuck reading?”
"Funny you should ask," I say. "I've got a whole list of strategies readers can try when they get stuck:"

By now, the majority of the class is eavesdropping on our conversation. Many of them seem excited to learn there are other ways than rereading to get unstuck. I pass out a sheet listing the following fix-up strategies:

- Make a connection between the text and:
  - Your life.
  - Your knowledge of the world.
  - Another text.
- Make a prediction.
- Stop and think about what you have already read.
- Ask yourself a question and try to answer it.
- Reflect in writing on what you have read.
- Visualize.
- Use print conventions.
- Retell what you've read.
- Reread.
- Notice patterns in text structure.
- Adjust your reading rate: slow down or speed up.

My students look at the list.

"Good readers actually do these things?" Jeff asks.

"When they get confused they have to do something to get rid of the misunderstanding," I say. "They can't ignore it, or the problem will get worse. Do you think good readers understand everything they read the first time?"

Jeff gives me a funny look—this is exactly what he does think. He assumes proficient readers automatically comprehend everything they read. He can't believe they also struggle to understand difficult text.

Then Leigha whines, "I don't even know what these things mean!" I pause, and explain that we will begin the work of understanding what these strategies mean. It's work that will require teacher modeling and practice that will take many weeks.

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Make a Connection Between the Text and Your Life, Your Knowledge of the World, or Another Text

Sometimes a reader has information about a topic in his head that isn't being used. When brought to bear, this background knowledge can be a powerful tool, helping the reader repair meaning. Good readers know that
using knowledge to make a connection will help them understand their reading better. They use memories, personal experiences, information about the subject, the author’s style, and textual organization to help them visualize, predict, ask questions, stay focused, and remember what they have read.

Text connections can give a reader insights into a character’s motive. Sometimes recalling factual information helps the reader understand why an event is taking place. Remembering another story with a similar plot enables the reader to anticipate action. Identifying an author’s writing style or the organizational pattern of a text helps the reader understand what the author is saying.

Make a Prediction

Good readers anticipate what’s coming next. Based on what they’ve already read, readers expect certain new events to occur. When an event doesn’t match a prediction, readers rethink and revise their thinking. More important, they are alerted to possible confusion. Sometimes misreading words throws the prediction off. When readers predict, they are aware meaning is breaking down. Instead of ignoring an incorrect prediction, they get back into the action by making a new guess. Predicting jolts readers back on track. It keeps them involved so they aren’t surprised by incorrect conclusions.

Stop and Think About What You Have Already Read

This one is so easy most students ignore it. Yet it is one of the most useful fix-up strategies of all. Good readers ponder what they have read. They connect newly acquired knowledge with information they already have. Stopping and thinking gives readers time to synthesize new information. It allows opportunities to ask questions, visualize, and determine what is important in the text.

Ask a Question

Good readers ask themselves questions when they read. Curious about the answers, they continue reading. Sometimes these questions are answered directly in the text, and meaning is clarified. Typically, clarifying questions are about a character, setting, event, or process: who, what, when, and where questions.

Other times, answers to readers’ questions aren’t found in the text. These are pondering questions that don’t always have simple answers.
They ask how and why. In these cases, the reader is forced to go beyond the words to find the answer, either by drawing an inference or by going to another source.

Struggling readers sometimes expect to find all the answers to their questions in the text. These readers often miss test questions like “What’s the best title for this piece?” or “What’s the main idea?” They don’t realize that the answers can be found by using clues from the text and their background knowledge to draw an inference. Many secondary students think this is cheating or wasting time.

Readers who ask questions and know where the answers to their questions are to be found are more likely to have a richer read, to infer, to draw conclusions, and regain control of their reading.

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**Write About What You’ve Read**

Writing down what they think about what they’ve read allows readers to clarify their thinking. It is an opportunity to reflect. Readers better understand their reading when they have written about it. The writing may be a summary or a response. Sometimes just jotting down a few notes will clarify meaning.

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**Visualize**

When meaning breaks down, good readers consciously create images in their head to help them make sense of what the words are saying. They use movies, television, and life to help them picture what is happening. When a reader can visualize what is happening, comprehension improves. Secondary students are bombarded with visual images. These images can help readers make a video in their head. If they can “see it,” they often understand it.

Last summer, I worked with a young man named Jason, who was soon to be a senior. His mother was concerned that he wouldn’t do well in English because he didn’t remember what he read. For an hour a week I helped him learn how to use background knowledge and create visual images while he read.

As a homework assignment, I asked him to read a controversial magazine article about Area 51 (a suspected top-secret government research and development site investigating UFOs), thinking he would have no trouble relating it to one of the movies he had seen about UFOs. He came back the next week complaining that he didn’t understand what he read because he didn’t have any background knowledge about the topic.
I asked if he had seen any television shows or movies that might help him visualize what was happening. Jason looked up from the magazine and said, “Yeah, I saw a movie with Will Smith about aliens that were attacking the earth.” Then he said something that really surprised me. “I didn’t think I should really use movies when I’m reading. Isn’t that cheating?”

“Cheating?” I asked incredulously. “What do you mean?”

Jason explained that his teachers often complained that students watched too much TV and wasted their time at movie theaters. Even though the movie he was remembering featured Area 51, he didn’t think he should use it to do “schoolwork.”

Jason remembered the movie in great detail. He described the desert and the top security surrounding the area. When we went back to reread the article, I asked Jason to use those images to help him visualize the words in the text. Almost automatically, he began to comprehend parts that were confusing before. He now understood why there was no water in “Groom Lake,” that it was so named because it once was a lake during prehistoric times. He could now visualize a top security facility in the middle of nowhere and was even able to infer that it was where it was because of its inaccessibility. Once Jason realized it was all right to use his vast repertoire of video images, he was able to better visualize the words he was reading.

Use Print Conventions

Key words, bold print, italicized words, capital letters, and punctuation are all used to enhance understanding. Conventions of print help the author convey intent. They help the reader determine what is important and what the author values. Conventions of print give the reader insight into voice, inflections, and how the author wants the piece to sound. Poor readers often ignore conventions because they are unaware of their function. Pointing out conventions will not only improve reading comprehension but also help students use these same conventions to convey meaning when they write.

Retell What You’ve Read

Taking a moment to retell what has been read helps the reader reflect. It activates background knowledge and also provides a check on whether the reader is understanding. When readers can’t retell what they read, it is an indication that their minds have been wandering or confusion has set in. Asking What have I just read? refreshes the reader’s memory and prepares her to read the next part. This is a useful strategy when returning to read-
ing after some time has passed. Students frequently read something and then don’t pick up the material again for several days. Teaching students to quickly recall what they have already read before starting new material can save time. Readers who don’t recall what they have read before beginning new text end up doing it while they are reading the new material and therefore don’t pay attention to it.

Reread

When meaning breaks down, readers can stop and decide whether there is something in the text they can reread that will help them understand the piece better. Since this is the one strategy most readers know automatically, it needs little explaining. An important aspect to remember is that a student doesn’t have to reread everything for the strategy to be helpful. Sometimes rereading portions of the text—a sentence, or even just a word—can enhance comprehension. Struggling readers tend to think rereading means they have to reread everything.

Notice Patterns in Text Structure

Genres have specific organizational patterns. Recognizing how a piece is organized helps readers locate information more quickly. When my daughters played high school volleyball, I relied on the organizational pattern of the local newspaper to find out quickly whether they were mentioned in an article. I knew the sports section was toward the back of the paper and that every Thursday the paper featured high school athletics after professional and collegiate sports. I didn’t have to read the entire newspaper—nor the entire sports section—to find out the information I wanted.

Some struggling readers believe that they have to read everything from cover to cover, even nonfiction. Taking time to explain how a piece is organized helps students figure out where information is found. It helps them determine what is important. When meaning breaks down, readers can stop and think how the text is organized and see whether there is something in the organizational pattern that will help them understand the piece.

Adjust Reading Rate: Slow Down or Speed Up

Contrary to what struggling readers think, good readers don’t read every-
secondary students read course textbooks at the same rate they read their favorite magazine. Good readers slow down when something is difficult or unfamiliar. They realize that in order to construct meaning, their rate must decrease. They also know that it's okay to read faster when something is familiar or boring. Reading faster sometimes forces the brain to stay engaged. Good readers select a rate based on the difficulty of the material, their purpose in reading it, and their familiarity with the topic.

Not all fix-up strategies will work all the time. Some work better than others depending on the nature of your confusion. It is important that students know that when good readers get stuck, they don't quit. They stop and decide how to repair their confusion. The more plans readers have for reconstructing comprehension, the more likely they are to stick with their reading.

### Driving and Reading

My friend and colleague Laura Benson once used a metaphor comparing reading with driving a car. It hit home, and I've embellished it to help students understand how important monitoring comprehension is and how useful fix-up strategies can be.

When I drive, I have a destination in mind. I am very conscious of what is going on around me. I monitor my speed. I compare it with the posted limits. I know to slow down for speed traps, and I know when I can exceed the speed limit without risking danger to myself or others. When a song comes on the radio that I like, I turn it up. When a song comes on that I don't like, I change the station. I watch the gas and oil gauges to make sure they are in acceptable ranges. I look in the mirrors so I know where other cars are around me. As long as I am heading toward my destination, I keep driving.

However, if I encounter difficulty, I stop and try to correct the problem. If I get a flat tire or I am caught speeding, I can't keep driving unless I want to make my situation worse. Driving on a flat can bend the rim and foul up the alignment. Ignoring the flashing red lights of a patrol car can land me in jail. There are no two ways around it. I can't keep going. I need to stop and plan what to do next.

This plan doesn't need to be elaborate, but it does have to meet the demands of the situation. My thinking needs to be flexible; I might have to try a few different strategies before I find one that works. I have to do more than sit in the car and cry. Crying won't help me get back on the road. I need to weigh my options and decide which one will help me the most.
If I want to fix the flat tire, the obvious choice would be to change it. Unfortunately, this won't work for me because I don't even know where the spare is, let alone the circular wrench that gets the tire off the car. Changing the tire isn't a plan that will help me. But I can't just sit there; I need to try something else.

I could use the cell phone to call someone, but when I reach into the glove compartment to retrieve it, I realize this plan won't work either. Someone has used the phone and has neglected to return it. I can decide to walk to a gas station, but I notice that it is getting dark and I am in a part of town that isn't safe; walking wouldn't be smart. Finally, I decide to raise the hood of the car, lock the doors, turn on my flashers, and wait for a police officer to come to my aid. The point is, I don't give up. When one plan doesn't work, I try something else.

Monitoring comprehension and using fix-up strategies is a lot like driving. Good readers expect to arrive at meaning, just as good drivers expect to arrive at their destination. A reader's ultimate purpose is to gain meaning. In order to do this, readers must monitor their comprehension, and when meaning breaks down, they need to repair it.

Repairing Confusion

Students need opportunities to select fix-up strategies based on the nature of the problem. Not every fix-up strategy works in every instance. Before students can use fix-up strategies flexibly and automatically, they need to recognize confusion and analyze what is causing the confusion. Only then can readers choose how they will try to repair meaning.

Readers who encounter an unknown word know that rereading the word over and over again isn't going to help. They may ask someone the meaning or look the word up in the dictionary. Circumstances dictate which fix-up strategy to use. If the reader is alone, she can't ask for help. If she doesn't have a dictionary or is too lazy to look up the word, she has to find another way to help herself. Perhaps she reads around the unknown word and tries to make a logical guess about its meaning. She may decide that the word is unimportant and consciously skip it. She may conclude that unless the word reappears, it isn't necessary to the understanding of the piece. If the word does reappear, she may decide it is important. She can flag it so she can talk to her teacher about it the next day. A reader who is aware of all of these options can attack her comprehension problem.

Another day, another class. I refer to the list of fix-up strategies on the
"Jim's problem is he doesn't know what *pariah* means. What could he do?"
"Just skip it," says Brandon.
"He could just skip it," I say, "but what if it is a word he really needs to know?"
"I could look it up," says Jim. Unfortunately, at the time our room was equipped with third-grade dictionaries that had few polysyllabic words and Jim was unable to find his unknown word.
"Okay, now what do you do?" I ask.
Jim looks at the list of fix-up strategies. "I could ask someone for help, or I could just skip it."
Sensing that Jim is feeling he is working too hard to find the meaning of the word, I tell him, "A pariah is a social outcast." Jim smiles and writes the definition on a sticky note. I don't want to stop here, though. I tell the class that sometimes it is okay to decide to skip the word. However, if the word keeps appearing, it's probably important. Asking someone what a word means is okay too, but if no one is around to ask, it is important to know other ways to figure out unknown words. Here are a few strategies to try:

1. **Look at the structure of the word.** Is there a familiar prefix, root, or suffix? Teachers don't teach structural analysis because it is fun and exhilarating. They teach it because sometimes readers can use this information to crack difficult words and approximate meanings.

2. **Use the glossary if there is one.** Let's be honest: Most people don't look up every unknown word they come to. However, glossaries are handy and much easier to use than an unwieldy dictionary.

3. **Read the words around the unknown word.** Can another word be substituted? Take a guess. What word would make sense there?

4. **Write the word down on a sticky note.** The next day in class, ask the teacher.

Next, Amber reads a paragraph aloud to the class. "When I read this, I was thinking about something else," she says.
"Amber caught herself thinking about something other than the book, I do that too," I confess. "Amber recognizes her mind is wandering and instead of reading on she stops to fix her problem."
I ask Amber how she knows she is stuck.
"I was reading about the slaves. The text made me think they were treated like animals. Animals started me thinking about my dog at home, who is about to have puppies. When I realized what I was thinking about, I had read the whole page and didn't remember a thing."
Again, I refer to the list of fix-up strategies on the board. "What can
Kandice says, “Reread.”

Even though Amber says, “Good idea,” I can tell she’s not satisfied with the answer. I ask the class, “What else can she try?”

Curtis suggests that Amber go back to the last part she remembers. As she rereads she should consciously try to make a picture in her head. “Try to visualize what’s happening in the book,” says Curtis. “It might make it easier to pay attention if you have a picture in your head.”

Amber is ready to reread. She has a concrete plan of attack.

Finally DeAndre, who is reading Nightjohn (Paulsen 1993), says he is confused by the characters’ dialogue. He doesn’t know who is talking. His confusion has a lot to do with his inattentiveness to the conventions of print. He is not using punctuation to aid meaning. A point out that quotation marks and new paragraphs are used to help the reader know who is talking without putting he said, she said in all the time. When a new character talks, a new paragraph begins. Quotation marks separate one person’s speeches from another’s.

I ask DeAndre to go back to where the book last made sense. I ask him to begin rereading this part out loud. After a sentence or two I stop him and ask, “Who is talking now?” He tells me it is Sarney, a young slave girl. DeAndre continues, but I can tell by the way he is reading that he has no idea who is speaking. I ask him who is talking now.

“I don’t know. It is either Nightjohn or Sarney,” he answers.

I point out the quotation marks and ask DeAndre to return to the point where Sarney last spoke. I ask him to slow down and look for paragraph changes. DeAndre adjusts his speed and forces himself to notice paragraph changes and quotation marks. He begins rereading, after saying to himself, “Okay, Sarney is talking now.” He moves on and says, “This is Nightjohn talking.” Noticing quotation marks and other print conventions make it easy to tell who is talking.

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Practice Makes Perfect

After students know how to recognize their confusion and which fix-up strategies are available for them to use, they can practice their thinking using the following Comprehension Constructor:

I am confused by (copy directly from the text whatever your confusion is):

I am confused because (try to diagnose why you are confused):
I will try (record different fix-up strategies you try):

I understand (explain how your understanding is deeper as a result of the fix-up strategies you've used):

Before giving this Comprehension Constructor to students to complete on their own, I explain how to complete each line using something I am reading. On the first line, for example, students are tempted to write, "I'm confused because it's hard." I model on a transparency of the Comprehension Constructor how to copy the confusion directly from the text. Later, Joey, a ninth grader reading Nightjohn, writes on the first line, "My job was to spit chewing tobacco on the roses."

On the second line students are tempted to write, "I am confused because I don't get it." I explain that this line is a place for students to analyze why they think they are confused. Joey writes, "I am confused because I've never heard of spitting chewing tobacco on plants to kill bugs."

The third line is reserved for fix-up strategies students try to clear up their confusion. Joey writes, "I will try to get unstuck by rereading, making connections, stopping and thinking."

The last line is an opportunity for students to synthesize their thinking and decide how using fix-up strategies repaired their confusion. Joey writes, "I understand that chewing tobacco is made from tobacco leaves and water. Saliva is generated and the tobacco juice will kill the bugs on the roses because it will eat their stomachs away. That's why you spit the tobacco out instead of swallowing it. If the tobacco hurts people's stomachs, it must be bad for bugs."

Even though Joey wasn't exactly correct in his theory of tobacco and pest control, he was able to repair his confusion enough to keep going. Joey is a reader who typically quits when confusion sets in. With this Comprehension Constructor he was able to pull himself through a few thinking processes in order to fix up meaning. He did it all by himself. I didn't intervene and tell him how to get unstuck. By focusing on the process, Joey was able to repair his own confusion.

What Works

1. Share material you find confusing. Remind students that even good readers get confused when they read. Demonstrate what you do when
you recognize a problem in your comprehension. Show students how
to flag interruptions in meaning. Try reading aloud a difficult piece of
text and have students record the fix-up strategies you use to regain
meaning.

TEACHING POINT: Good readers isolate confusion and make a plan to repair
meaning. They know that if they continue reading without doing anything to
help themselves, their confusion will get worse.

2. Give a list of fix-up strategies to your students. Ask them to use these
strategies while reading their class assignments. Ask them to try at least
one fix-up strategy before you help them clear up their confusion.

TEACHING POINT: Good readers don’t quit when they become confused. They
use fix-up strategies to repair confusion.

3. Demonstrate how listening to the voices in your head helps you know
which fix-up strategy to use. Let students know that not every fix-up
strategy works in every situation. Tell them that it is okay to abandon a
fix-up strategy if it isn’t helping.

TEACHING POINT: Good readers use fix-up strategies flexibly. When one doesn’t
work, they try another one.