Reading Comprehension & the GED® Test

It's not an exaggeration to say that the GED® test is one long reading test. Not only does a candidate need strong reading skills for the obvious Language Arts, Reading (Test 4), but also he/she needs to have a powerful arsenal of reading strategies to attack Social Studies (Test 2) and Science (Test 3). Moreover, reading skills are vital to Mathematics (Test 5) and Language Arts, Writing, (Test 1) as well. It follows then that helping our students become stronger, “strategic readers” will serve them well not only for their immediate goal of passing the GED, but also it will help beyond that goal to other situations where reading and reasoning skills are critical.

GED preparation books are widely available and seem to be a logical place to begin. But they are not necessary, or even sufficient, in the initial steps of GED preparation. GED preparation books test reading skills; they do not teach them. If a candidate for the GED does not have strong reading skills, the short, oftentimes dry passages from GED prep books will not be a rich enough diet to acquire the skills needed to become a “strategic reader.” The wise and prudent teacher draws from many other sources of timely materials that are geared to their students’ interests and reading abilities. These authentic materials provide a much richer fare for teaching reading strategies and higher-level thinking skills. Therefore, recommendations for instruction and articles about reading comprehension instruction are included throughout this curriculum guide. GED preparation books are most useful in helping your students develop test-taking skills and providing practice in test-taking; in those ways they are invaluable.

It’s also worthwhile to note that students do not have to memorize facts and dates to pass the content-area GED Tests. However, having general knowledge, for instance about critical events in U.S. history or fundamental ideas about science topics are very important for your students’ success. Developing your students’ working vocabulary, using a variety of methods, is another piece of the necessary foundation for GED success. So being true to its name, the GED or General Educational Development Test seeks, through the vehicle of a series of content-area reading tests, to ascertain a candidate’s general educational development. Having wide-ranging background knowledge, coupled with strong reading skills and a fairly expansive vocabulary will help your students to become well-prepared candidates for the GED.
Seven Strategies to Teach Students Text Comprehension

Comprehension strategies are conscious plans — sets of steps that good readers use to make sense of text. Comprehension strategy instruction helps students become purposeful, active readers who are in control of their own reading comprehension. The seven strategies here appear to have a firm scientific basis for improving text comprehension.

1. Monitoring comprehension
Students who are good at monitoring their comprehension know when they understand what they read and when they do not. They have strategies to "fix" problems in their understanding as the problems arise. Research shows that instruction, even in the early grades, can help students become better at monitoring their comprehension.

Comprehension monitoring instruction teaches students to:
- Be aware of what they do understand
- Identify what they do not understand
- Use appropriate strategies to resolve problems in comprehension

2. Metacognition
Metacognition can be defined as "thinking about thinking." Good readers use metacognitive strategies to think about and have control over their reading. Before reading, they might clarify their purpose for reading and preview the text. During reading, they might monitor their understanding, adjusting their reading speed to fit the difficulty of the text and "fixing" any comprehension problems they have. After reading, they check their understanding of what they read.

Students may use several comprehension monitoring strategies:
- Identify where the difficulty occurs "I don't understand the second paragraph on page 76."
  - Identify what the difficulty is "I don't get what the author means when she says, 'Arriving in America was a milestone in my grandmother's life.'"
  - Restate the difficult sentence or passage in their own words "Oh, so the author means that coming to America was a very important event in her grandmother's life."
- Look back through the text "The author talked about Mr. McBride in Chapter 2, but I don't remember much about him. Maybe if I reread that chapter, I can figure out why he's acting this way now."
- Look forward in the text for information that might help them to resolve the difficulty
"The text says, 'The groundwater may form a stream or pond or create a wetland. People can also bring groundwater to the surface.' Hmm, I don't understand how people can do that... Oh, the next section is called 'Wells.' I'll read this section to see if it tells how they do it."

3. Graphic and semantic organizers

Graphic organizers illustrate concepts and relationships between concepts in a text or using diagrams. Graphic organizers are known by different names, such as maps, webs, graphs, charts, frames, or clusters.

Regardless of the label, graphic organizers can help readers focus on concepts and how they are related to other concepts. Graphic organizers help students read and understand textbooks and picture books.

Graphic organizers can:

• Help students focus on text structure "differences between fiction and nonfiction" as they read
• Provide students with tools they can use to examine and show relationships in a text
• Help students write well-organized summaries of a text

Here are some examples of graphic organizers:

**Venn-Diagrams**
Used to compare or contrast information from two sources. For example, comparing two Dr. Seuss books.

**Storyboard/Chain of Events**
Used to order or sequence events within a text. For example, listing the steps for brushing your teeth.

**Story Map**
Used to chart the story structure. These can be organized into fiction and nonfiction text structures. For example, defining characters, setting, events, problem, resolution in a fiction story; however in a nonfiction story, main idea and details would be identified.

**Cause/Effect**
Used to illustrate the cause and effects told within a text. For example, staying in the sun too long may lead to a painful sunburn.

4. Answering questions

Questions can be effective because they:

• Give students a purpose for reading
• Focus students' attention on what they are to learn
• Help students to think actively as they read
• Encourage students to monitor their comprehension
• Help students to review content and relate what they have learned to what they already know

The Question-Answer Relationship strategy (QAR) encourages students to learn how to answer questions better. Students are asked to indicate whether the information
they used to answer questions about the text was textually explicit information (information that was directly stated in the text), textually implicit information (information that was implied in the text), or information entirely from the students' own background knowledge.

There are four different types of questions:

1. "Right There"
   Questions found right in the text that ask students to find the one right answer located in one place as a word or a sentence in the passage.
   Example: Who is Frog's friend? Answer: Toad

2. "Think and Search"
   Questions based on the recall of facts that can be found directly in the text. Answers are typically found in more than one place, thus requiring students to "think" and "search" through the passage to find the answer.
   Example: Why was Frog sad? Answer: His friend was leaving.

3. "Author and You"
   Questions require students to use what they already know, with what they have learned from reading the text. Students must understand the text and relate it to their prior knowledge before answering the question.
   Example: How do you think Frog felt when he found Toad? Answer: I think that Frog felt happy because he had not seen Toad in a long time. I feel happy when I get to see my friend who lives far away.

4. "On Your Own"
   Questions are answered based on a student’s prior knowledge and experiences. Reading the text may not be helpful to them when answering this type of question.
   Example: How would you feel if your best friend moved away? Answer: I would feel very sad if my best friend moved away because I would miss her.

5. Generating questions
   By generating questions, students become aware of whether they can answer the questions and if they understand what they are reading. Students learn to ask themselves questions that require them to combine information from different segments of text. For example, students can be taught to ask main idea questions that relate to important information in a text.

6. Recognizing story structure
   In story structure instruction, students learn to identify the categories of content (characters, setting, events, problem, resolution). Often, students learn to recognize story structure through the use of story maps. Instruction in story structure improves students' comprehension.
7. Summarizing

Summarizing requires students to determine what is important in what they are reading and to put it into their own words. Instruction in summarizing helps students:

- Identify or generate main ideas
- Connect the main or central ideas
- Eliminate unnecessary information
- Remember what they read

Effective comprehension strategy instruction is explicit. Research shows that explicit teaching techniques are particularly effective for comprehension strategy instruction. In explicit instruction, teachers tell readers why and when they should use strategies, what strategies to use, and how to apply them. The steps of explicit instruction typically include direct explanation, teacher modeling (“thinking aloud”), guided practice, and application.

**Direct explanation**
The teacher explains to students why the strategy helps comprehension and when to apply the strategy.

**Modeling**
The teacher models, or demonstrates, how to apply the strategy, usually by "thinking aloud" while reading the text that the students are using.

**Guided practice**
The teacher guides and assists students as they learn how and when to apply the strategy.

**Application**
The teacher helps students practice the strategy until they can apply it independently.

Effective comprehension strategy instruction can be accomplished through cooperative learning, which involves students working together as partners or in small groups on clearly defined tasks. Cooperative learning instruction has been used successfully to teach comprehension strategies. Students work together to understand texts, help each other learn and apply comprehension strategies. Teachers help students learn to work in groups. Teachers also provide modeling of the comprehension strategies.

Using Think-Alouds to Improve Reading Comprehension


Students need to think while they are reading. By using modeling, coached practice, and reflection, you can teach your students strategies to help them think while they read and build their comprehension.

Good readers:

- Draw on background knowledge as they read
- Make predictions as they read
- Visualize the events of a text as they read
- Recognize confusion as they read
- Recognize a text's structure/organization as they read
- Identify/recognize a purpose for reading
- Monitor their strategy use according to the purpose for reading the text

In other words, students need to think while they are reading. By using modeling, coached practice, and reflection, you can teach your students strategies to help them think while they read and build their comprehension.

What you will need:

- Five different texts
- Three colored objects (i.e. hats, balls, or sticks)

Modeling: What it is

By modeling for students the types of behaviors good readers are engaged in as they read, we are providing them with the opportunity to become aware of the many strategies and monitoring behaviors that good readers use.

When good readers are reading relatively simple texts (according to their own reading abilities) these strategic behaviors are fairly automatic. Typically, good readers only become aware of their strategy use when they recognize that they are failing to comprehend. They then are cognizant of the need to reevaluate their strategy use in order to remedy their failure to comprehend. Furthermore, good readers are more likely to fall back on appropriate strategies when the need to change strategies becomes apparent. For most poor readers however, using a variety of strategies, using strategies appropriately, and monitoring strategies is not automatic. Therefore, modeling strategic behaviors for struggling readers by thinking aloud for them while we read (and hence, allowing students to think aloud), is the first step in raising their awareness of what it means to be a strategic reader.
An Activity

Model thinking aloud for your students with one of the texts. (Students should have a copy of this text in front of them.) Have students keep a list of the different types of things you (the reader) are doing to help you better understand the text. When you're done, start a master list on a large piece of paper, writing down strategies students share with you – using their own words.

Coached Practice: What it is

By engaging poor readers in coached practice in the think-aloud method, we are providing them with the opportunity and guidance they need to choose useful, appropriate strategies to enhance reading comprehension. We are encouraging them to think about why and when to use certain strategies and providing them with the tools they need to successfully monitor their own comprehension. With enough modeling and coached practice, students will be on their way to becoming independent users of strategies. Eventually they will become their own coaches. Ultimately, using the strategies will become more automatic for them, so that activities they have practiced will be happening automatically in their heads.

An Activity

With a different text from the one you initially modeled, tell students you will be stopping occasionally as you read to ask them what they are thinking about. Tell them you will call on one of them and ask them, “What are you thinking about now?” (They should not have a copy of the text in front of them.) If, when a student shares his/her thoughts, the connection to the text is not clear, encourage the student to explain himself/herself. (If students are having trouble with this task, focus in on one single strategy – for example, prediction.) Once you've finished reading the text, go back to your master list of strategies, discuss which ones the students used, and add to the list if new strategies come up. Repeat this activity another day, using a new text. If students have trouble, you may need to stop and model thinking aloud again for students.

Next, insert write-in boxes into a new text. Explain to students that they will be doing exactly what they had been doing out loud, but this time they will be writing their thoughts in the boxes. When students are finished with the task, read the text, stopping to ask students to read what they have written in the boxes and to explain what made them think of what they wrote. Go back to your master strategy list and have the students talk about the strategies they used. Add to the list if possible.

What strategies are you discovering students are not using, even when the text and the purpose for reading would seem to encourage those strategies? Focus in on 2 or 3 of those strategies. Find a text which lends itself to those 2 or 3 strategies. Assign a strategy to each of the different colored objects. Explain to students that, when they
are presented with a colored object they are to use the strategy assigned to it. Read a
text to them and stop at certain predetermined stop points. Hand a student one of the
objects and encourage him/her to use the strategy associated with that color.

**Reflection: What it is**

By getting students to reflect on the process of thinking aloud as they read, we’re
encouraging them to recognize the difference between reading the words and
comprehending the text. By talking about their own strategy use students gain insights
into the complexities of reading, and hence expand their understanding of what it
means to be a “good reader.”

**An Activity**

Have students reflect on the process of thinking aloud. Have them write a letter to you
or to another classmate in which they reflect on how they feel thinking aloud benefits
them as readers. What have they learned about reading? What are they doing now
that they didn't used to do?

**Summary**

These are a few of the necessary components to using the think-aloud method
successfully. However, the most important component that will determine the success
of the think-aloud method in your classroom is you. There is no magic formula or set of
steps which will make this method (or any other) successful. Success lies in how you use
it – which means choosing appropriate texts, listening carefully to students,
determining students' abilities, and adapting the method to your own students' needs
and abilities. In order to do this successfully, we feel that it is important to understand
why the method works. In other words, you need to have a basic understanding of
what you're trying to accomplish by using this method.

This article is based on "Using Think-Alouds to Build Reading Comprehension" by Roger
Farr and Jenny Conner.

http://www.readingrockets.org/articles/102
Recommended Websites for Reading Comprehension

http://www.rhlschool.com/reading.htm
Reading comprehension worksheets

A focus on reading comprehension strategy instruction

http://www.opencourtresources.com/ocr/gradex/comprehension.html
Reading comprehension resources and posters

http://www.gamequarium.com/readquarium/comprehension.html
Online reading comprehension games

http://www.mrnussbaum.com/readingpassageindex.htm
Online reading comprehension practice