

Text Savvy

Using a Shared Reading Framework to Build Comprehension

GRADES 3-6

Sarah Daunis
Maria Cassiani Iams

FOREWORD BY
Janet Angelillo

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Portsmouth, NH

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Five Essential Reading Skills Used by Proficient Readers

2

Tringa

Tringa, a fifth grader, came into my classroom reading on grade level—a solid 3, according to the state reading assessment rubric, a proficient reader. She was a committed student, always wanting to do her best. She read a wide variety of texts over extended periods of time. She tried all of the strategies introduced in class, yet continued to retain a very literal interpretation of the texts she read.

Tringa spoke English as her second language and did not have someone who modeled fluent reading of English at home. As she encountered more sophisticated texts, I knew that she would need extra support.

I wondered how I could support Tringa on two levels: How could I push this literal reader to infer big ideas beyond the text, moving her from one who met the standards to one who exceeded them? And how could I ensure that Tringa maintained comprehension as she encountered new vocabulary? In short, how could I nudge her from a 3 to a 4?

Teaching kids how to read with meaning and understanding often prompts me to examine the work I do as a fluent and skillful reader. I switch from reading one genre to another within minutes; over the course of a day, I read memos, newspapers, articles, professional texts, fiction novels, menus, and grocery lists. And I read all texts successfully, with full comprehension. So what is it that I do as a proficient reader that allows me to understand a range of text genres?

While I do employ genre-specific reading strategies to understand the appropriate text, I consistently utilize a number of reading skills, no matter what I'm reading. I've thought of these as the five essential reading skills that help me understand any text.

Five Essential Reading Skills

As mentioned in the Introduction, the five essential reading skills proficient readers consistently use are as follows:

- previewing the text and having expectations
- locating oneself in the text
- envisioning
- inferring
- synthesizing

The integration of the five essential reading skills allows readers to understand the text, interact with the text, and own, or be able to effectively talk about, the text. Ellin Oliver Keene and Susan Zimmermann (1997) refer to this integration as a *mosaic*. In their book *Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader's Workshop*, Keene and Zimmermann highlight seven reading strategies that deepen comprehension: activating prior knowledge, determining importance, questioning, using visual/sensory images, inferring, retelling/synthesizing, and using fix-up strategies. The five essential reading skills I find proficient readers use are based not only on this work but also on the thinking from *Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension to Enhance Understanding*, in which Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis (2000) demonstrate that when readers make connections, question, infer, determine importance, visualize, synthesize, and monitor for meaning, they have a fuller and more complete understanding of the text.

I want my students to consistently employ these reading skills to understand any text, as I do in my adult reading life. However, I've noticed that as my upper-grade students encounter more sophisti-

cated texts, they seem to abandon the very fundamental reading habits, skills, and strategies that will enable them to comprehend the material. I've watched students who I thought were strong readers go from understanding a realistic fiction text to struggling through a historical fiction text on the same reading level. I've seen some students devour nonfiction science articles only to watch their eyes glaze over when they attempt to read and understand poetry. As I reflected on this disconnect, I realized that while I taught my kids genre-specific reading skills and strategies within a unit of study, I too had abandoned teaching and modeling the fundamental reading skills that proficient readers consistently utilize. No wonder my young students couldn't sustain the use of these reading skills—I wasn't providing enough practice. That's why I created a structure that allows me to highlight the five essential reading skills and allows my students to consistently practice them, infusing them into their reading lives. Weekly shared reading grants weekly attention to each of the five essential reading skills.

A Closer Look at the Essential Skills

Within every unit of study in reading, I model a range of reading strategies, showing students how I can build the reading skills that allow me to understand a text. While the following reading skills are taught through minilessons in my reading workshop, I explicitly re-teach them during weekly shared reading.

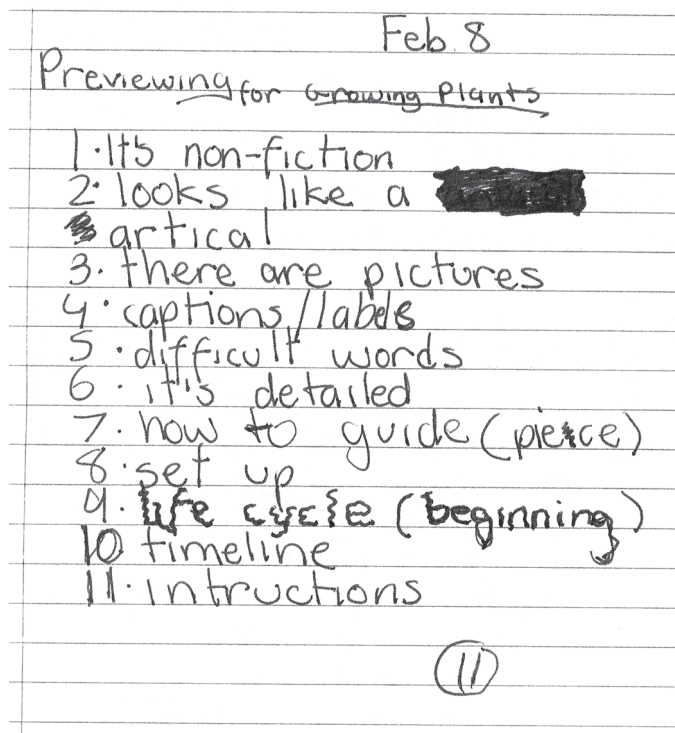
Having a First Glance: Previewing the Text and Having Expectations

When proficient readers are about to read a text, they quickly identify the genre of the text and, therefore, have expectations of the text. This prereading skill—also considered a behavior—happens so quickly that skilled readers might not even realize they do it. Randy Bomer (2003) likens this quick text identification to turning on the TV, glancing at the show, and—even if he's never seen it before—being able to

figure out what kind of show it is because it “fits” into something he *has* seen before. Even though I’ve never watched a “cop” show, I can pick one out with just a quick glance . . . and then turn the channel. The cop shows look quite different from the sitcoms or documentaries for which I’m searching. As a reader, when you picked up this book from the shelf, you quickly realized, just by looking at the cover, that it was a professional text—a text from one educator to another. Therefore, you are most likely thinking that you will learn some new information that you can add to your current understanding and philosophy about supporting readers in your classroom. You have certain expectations about how this text will “go.” When I pick up a memo from my mailbox at work, I know that there will be important information presented in short, terse writing. I’m expecting that the information on the memo most likely concerns something that impacts my fifth graders—the social studies test, middle school applications, or graduation. Whether it’s a professional text or a quick memo, knowing the genre of the text and having expectations of it allows us to *more skillfully* read the text itself. It’s as if we put a frame around our thinking *before* we start reading, helping us to contain our thoughts to both a specific purpose and a certain genre. When we engage in this essential prereading skill, we set ourselves up for a more successful comprehension of the text.

Although most of my experience is with third, fourth, and fifth graders, I have had opportunities to work with younger students. Coaching kindergartners to engage in prereading behaviors is not that different from coaching ten-year-olds. I’ll say to Adam, a five-year-old with a Level D book in his hands, “Watch me as I look at the cover of this book. I see a jungle gym, some swings, and some kids playing. I’m thinking that this book will be about playgrounds. I’m thinking that I’ll read about the different things that can be on a playground. Let’s take a book walk and see what we find.” Before Adam delves into his book, I show him how to preview the text and have expectations. He knows that his book will be mostly about playgrounds. As he narrows his focus for reading, he will be more successful in understanding the short story about playgrounds. In my fifth-grade classroom, I make a similar teaching point with Arlinda, who holds a Level S book in her hands. Before Arlinda turns to the first page in her novel, she employs a fundamental reading skill—

Figure 2-1 After looking at *Growing Plants*, a nonfiction piece, Tringa records her noticings. By previewing the text, she prepares herself for a thoughtful read.



previewing the text and having expectations—which helps her frame her purpose for reading and generating ideas about the text.

Previewing novels is one thing, and previewing shorter texts is another. I use the teaching structure of both minilessons and weekly shared reading to reinforce the transfer of prereading skills from genre to genre. When a text structure looks unfamiliar and daunting, my fifth graders seem to abandon what they know about smart prereading behaviors, like previewing the text and having expectations. Exposing my students to many different types of genres and text structures helps ease their apprehension and enables them to approach any text with a strong prereading plan. Applying this prereading skill ensures that readers will more successfully comprehend the text itself.

Doing a Double Take: Locating Oneself in the Text

Once proficient readers have previewed the text, identified the genre, and thought about their expectations for the text, they locate themselves in the text by utilizing some key reading strategies: activating prior knowledge, making connections, having questions, and determining importance. Locating oneself in the text strengthens one's active engagement with the text, improving fluency and expression while reading and encouraging appropriate reaction to the text. A fluent, expressive reader who reacts and responds to a text demonstrates his strong comprehension of the text.

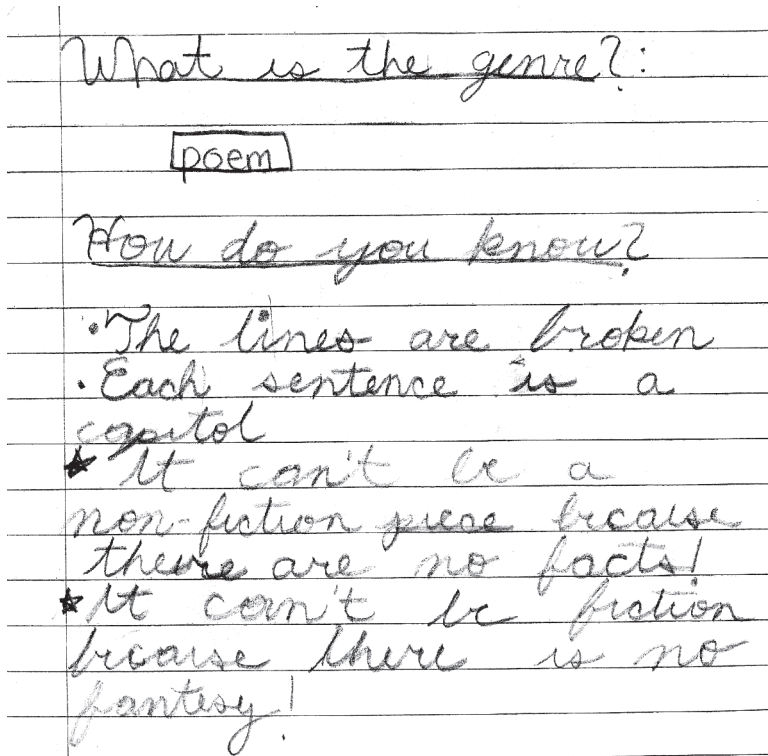
Activating Prior Knowledge

A key reading strategy, activating prior knowledge is essential both before reading and while reading. Once proficient readers set their purpose for reading, based on their preview of the text, they think about what they already know about the text topic. Activating prior knowledge helps readers ground themselves in their current understanding of the topic before they read to both confirm their thinking and learn new or conflicting information about the topic. Readers continue to activate prior knowledge while they read as they revise their thinking and ideas. Most often, my fifth graders activate prior knowledge when they read nonfiction texts; a text titled *It's a Mammal!* (Stewart 2004) naturally inspires my students to think about what they already know about mammals. Once they have secured themselves in their current knowledge about mammals, they are ready to read and learn more about mammals. However, proficient readers activate prior knowledge when they read any genre, not just nonfiction. My fifth-grade readers are quick to forget to recall what they already know about a topic if the text genre is a poem, a map, or even a story. Again, I use both minilessons and weekly shared reading to help students practice this reading strategy on a variety of text genres. In order for students to locate themselves in the text successfully, they must first consider their existing knowledge.

Making Connections

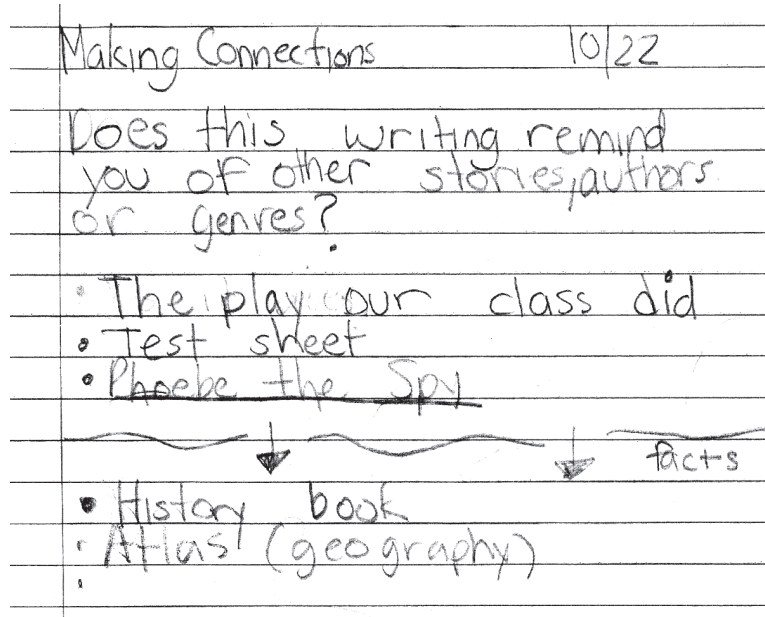
As proficient readers read, the information from the text reminds them of stories or ideas from their own lives, other texts they've read,

Figure 2-2 With this entry, Tringa challenges herself to think back to all she knows about poetry in order to confirm the genre of the current weekly shared reading text.



or ideas that exist in the world. These connections are deeper than “Oh, the character in this book has a cat, and so do I,” as they spark readers to react and respond to the text. As I read *A Million Little Pieces* (Frey 2003), I began to understand the same harrowing cycle of despair and desolation that also exists in *Random Family* (LeBlanc 2003), and I was moved to learn more about drug addiction and abuse and align more of my volunteer efforts with supporting recovering addicts. Not every connection readers make will be as reactionary and life changing as this one, but the effect of all powerful connections is the same—they enable the reader to more deeply understand the heart of the text. When readers understand the heart of

Figure 2-3 After reading an excerpt from *We Are Patriots: Hope's Revolutionary War Diary* (Gregory 2002), Tringa thinks about related books and experiences that strengthen her understanding of this text. She pushes herself to think beyond the confines of this book, to make connections.

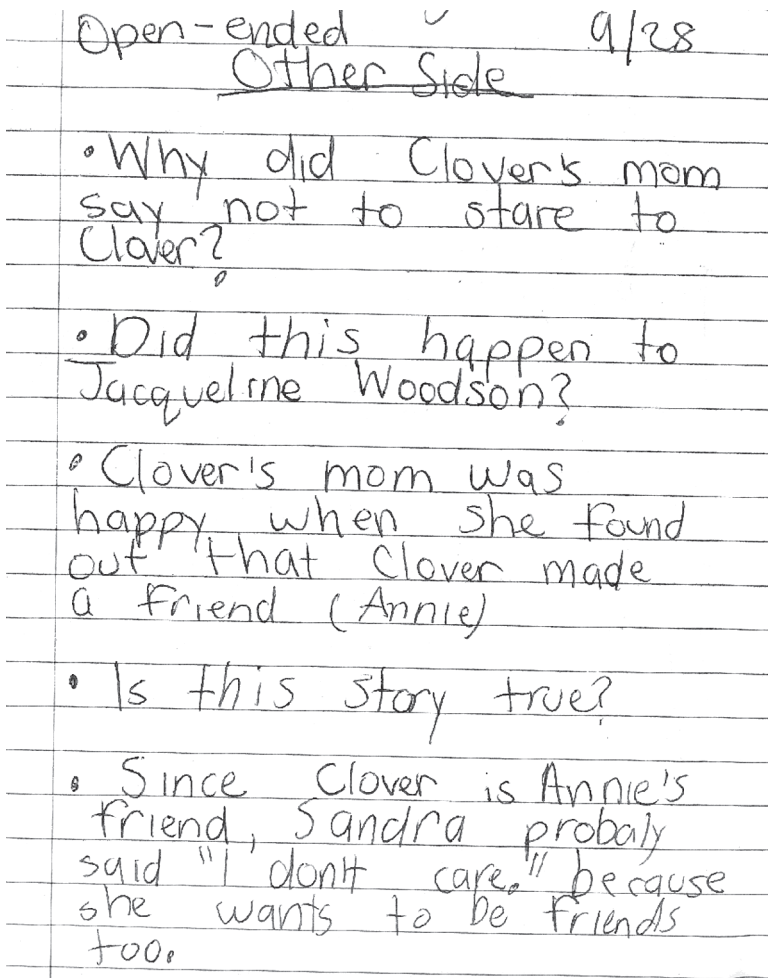


the text, they further engage as active participants with the text. A quick scan of the classroom during independent reading allows me to see which readers are reacting to the text and which readers are not; facial expressions, gasps, giggles, and tears demonstrate a reader who is making connections from the text to the world beyond the page. While my fifth-grade readers are more successful in making connections to realistic fiction stories, other text genres can prove to be just as engaging and thought provoking. Demonstrating reacting and making connections to poetry and nonfiction structures, and allowing time for my students to practice this strategy on these text genres, encourage them to make connections that deepen understanding when they read a variety of texts.

Having Questions

Proficient readers have questions beyond simple plot predictions (e.g., Will Ramona get in trouble for cracking the egg on her head?) that

Figure 2-4 By taking the time to ask questions of the text *The Other Side* (Woodson 2001), Tringa pushes herself to think deeply about the book.



encourage them to seek answers both inside and outside the text. Having questions is another reading strategy that enables readers to locate themselves in the text. By asking questions, proficient readers are engaged in reading, are committed to the text, and interact with the text to construct meaning. As fluent readers search for answers within the text and outside the text—through discussion or written response—they monitor their comprehension of the text. As I model this strategy for my students, I strive to make it clear that skilled readers question the

text as a way to interact and make meaning of the text, *not* just to have questions that go unanswered or are answered on the following page. I remember cringing as I watched third grader Christian write questions on sticky notes and slap them on every page of his book, never once stopping to consider, answer, or reflect on the sea of yellow stickies that were expanding his novel like an accordion. Just as I stress to my students that when they make a connection while they are reading, they need to stop and think about how that connection helps them to understand the text, I remind them that when they have questions while they are reading, they need to stop and think about how those questions help them understand the text.

Determining Importance

Proficient readers set a frame for their reading and thinking when they preview the text and have expectations. In essence, they determine a focus and a purpose for their reading before they delve into the text. For example, they may read to remember and confirm information, or they may read to learn new information and build their content and background knowledge. When skillful readers set a purpose for their reading, they also determine what's important in the text. Readers can locate themselves in the text by determining and thinking about the important ideas in the text. When I read aloud to my students, I model how I have hunches about what are the big and important ideas in the text. I explore my hunches as I read, noting substantiating evidence. I distinguish the important information from the interesting information, showing students that proficient readers are quite discerning. Determining important ideas and information in the text allows readers to make meaning of the more sophisticated upper-grade texts.

Filling in the Picture: Envisioning

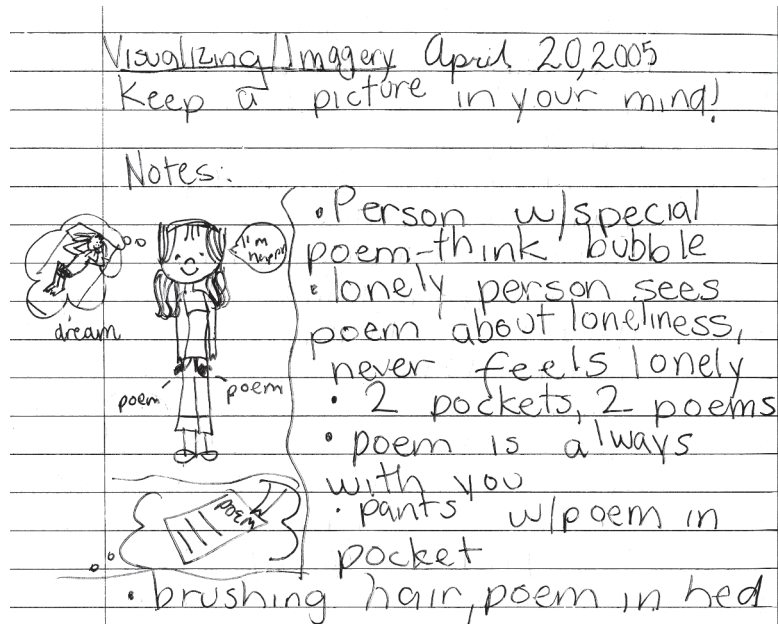
During a Calendar Day at Teachers College, Randy Bomer (2003) presented his thinking concerning readers; the presentation, titled "Minds on Fire: Teaching Readers to Think as They Read," detailed the kinds of thinking that are useful in reading comprehension development. When he came to envisioning as an essential reading skill, Randy bluntly stated, "The text is describing a picture to you as a reader. If you don't see the picture, you're not understanding the text."

Proficient readers envision while reading to *fill in the picture* in order to ensure their comprehension. Envisioning goes beyond “making a movie in your mind” and encompasses the picturing of ideas and abstract concepts. A fluent reader sees the text in his mind’s eye, regardless of the topic, genre, or text structure.

Stories lend themselves to envisioning so naturally that it is easy for me to show students how I create a movie of the text in my head, whether I’m reading *or* writing a story. Stories offer an imaginable context in which the plot develops, in which characters interact, and in which a problem arises and is (potentially) solved. Fluent readers can see, in their mind’s eye, the characters and the action of a story. Although the details of the characters’ faces may differ from reader to reader, the images are clear and enhance the meaning of the text. One of my favorite read-aloud books for fourth graders is *Holes*, by Louis Sachar (1998), because it so encourages readers to envision the story. The images of desolate Camp Green Lake, the unique and charming characters in the story, and the intricately woven plot haunt my nine-year-olds for weeks after I finish the book. Of course, a book this rich in imagery was made into a popular movie. I couldn’t resist traipsing with thirty-six fourth graders around New York City so we could see one of our favorite stories on the big screen. In the dark theatre, throughout the entire movie, my students expressed their shock and annoyance because they didn’t picture the characters, setting, or action in the way the movie portrayed them! As a fluent reader, I could relate, as I recalled how the movie versions of books often fall short of the movies that I created in my own mind’s eye. The power of envisioning is that it both heightens engagement with the text and deepens comprehension.

Envisioning goes beyond creating a movie of the text in one’s head—proficient readers also envision ideas and abstract concepts. Transferring this powerful reading skill from one comfortable genre—story—to other genres is essential and important, yet uncomfortable and unfamiliar for my upper-grade readers. Think about reading about an invisible idea, like evaporation, or an abstract concept, like government. Proficient readers can visualize diagrams (the water cycle) and spatial metaphors (“sections” of the U.S. government) in their mind’s eye. Some nonfiction texts offer visual supports, like charts, maps, and pictures, to scaffold the work for readers. However, nonfiction readers still must fill in the picture and

Figure 2-5 Tringa takes notes, identifying what she thinks is the most important information, before sketching a picture of “Keep a Poem in Your Pocket” (Schenk de Regniers 2005).

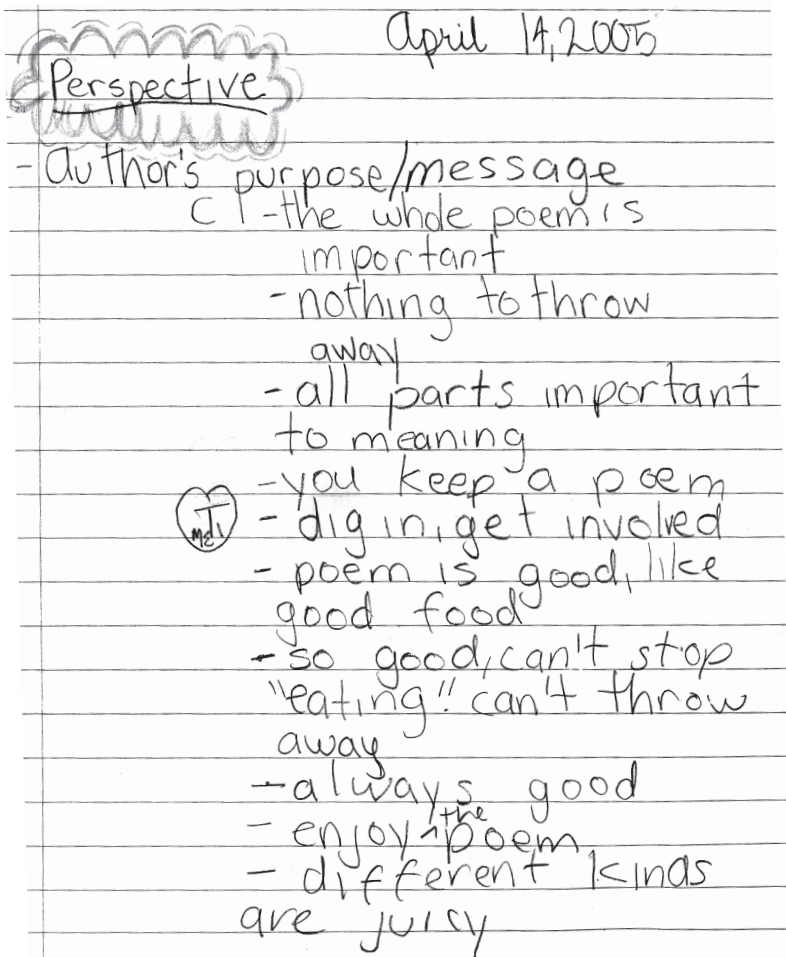


see all pieces and ideas of the text together to fully understand it. Poetry typically offers no pictorial support, challenging the reader to create images from a text with a more flexible and unpredictable structure. During weekly shared reading, students can practice the skill of envisioning on these more challenging types of text, strengthening the transference of the skill from genre to genre. By noticing and visualizing content words, comparisons, and figurative language, students are enabled to approach a variety of texts and apply the skill of envisioning, which will in turn augment their comprehension of the text.

Digging Deeper: Inferring

Inferring—reading the world around us and reading between the lines of a text—is one of the most important and sophisticated life skills *and* reading skills to teach and learn in upper-grade classrooms. In life, reading people’s body language, tone of voice, and eye contact will make our interaction with them much more appropriate and produc-

Figure 2-6 After several days with a text, Tringa is able to step back and think about the larger ideas in the text. You'll notice that Tringa designates the class conversation and ideas with a C and her own ideas with a T, for Tringa. By writing class and personal ideas in her notebook, she's meshing the thoughts of many conversations.



tive. As communicators, we infer that furrowed eyebrows and pursed lips probably mean that our boss is in a sour mood, and that we should stay away until further notice! How do we know that? We look at the clues—furrowed eyebrows and tight lips—and think about what we already know about those gestures. Putting the clues and our background information together, we make a smart inference.

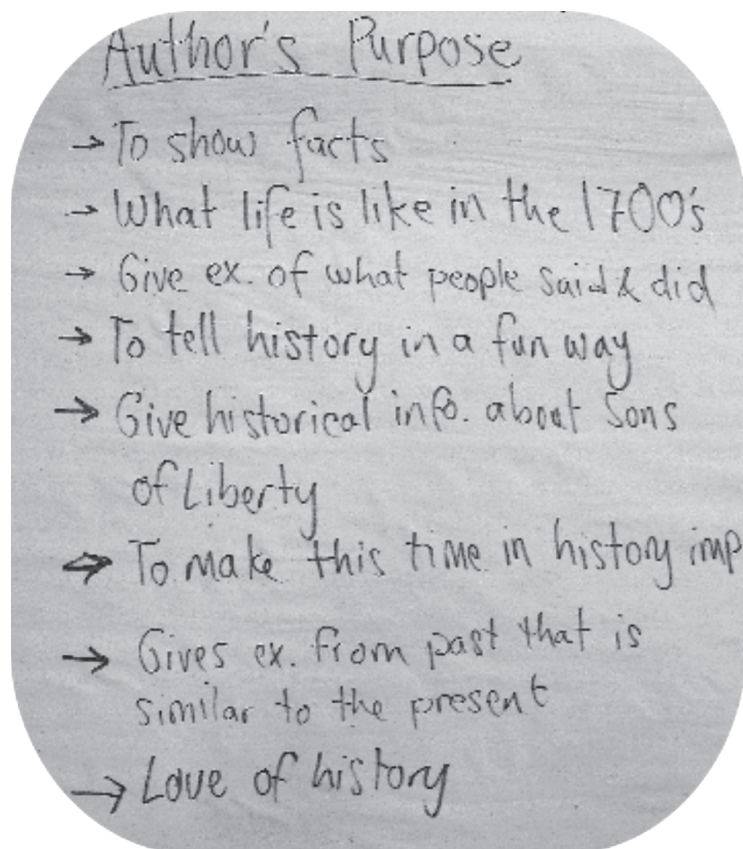
In reading, proficient readers use key information from the text and their prior knowledge to infer ideas and theories about the text. The implication is, then, that readers are able to identify the important information in the text and also possess a breadth and depth of background knowledge about life and the world. Skillful readers do not utilize reading skills in isolation, but in conjunction; the ability to infer is built from the abilities to have expectations of the text, locate oneself in the text, and envision. During weekly shared reading, I can provide more practice for my students to determine important information in the text while, through exposure to various texts, they build their background knowledge in efforts to strengthen their inferring skills.

Readers who infer understand both the tone of the text and the big ideas in the text that also exist in the world. Authors' perspectives are woven throughout the more sophisticated texts in upper-grade classrooms. Most often, authors write with an angle, subtly expressing their feelings about a topic or an idea. Additionally, humor and sarcasm make their way into the texts that are enjoyed by our older readers. Readers who can infer authors' perspectives and the tone of the text will naturally be more engaged with the text, thereby possessing a more solid understanding of the text. When I see students reading the ubiquitous *Series of Unfortunate Events*, by Lemony Snicket (1999–2006), I expect to see them smirking, shaking their heads, or even laughing out loud. Proficient readers who infer the ripe sarcasm and not so subtle thoughts about societal values will enjoy and understand the series much greater than readers who remain on the literal level.

Inferring big ideas in the text that exist in the world also solidifies readers' comprehension of the text. The most meaningful ideas from the text often stem from what readers infer, not from what's written on the page. When I read *Hoot*, by Carl Hiassen (2002), to my fourth graders, I very clearly shared my thinking about the bigger ideas in the story, derived from the details in the text and my own background knowledge. Soon, my students were just as passionate about animal rights as the characters in the book. The power of inferring, as evidenced by social action on the part of my students, allows readers to further capture and understand the heart of the text.

I notice that my students find identifying authors' perspectives and recognizing bigger ideas beyond the text more challenging in some texts and in some genres than others. I encourage students to

Figure 2-7 Here is a teacher's quick transcription of her students' collective inferences about a historical fiction text. The transcription allows the teacher to both assess students' understanding and build collective knowledge.



see the author's angle and understand the bigger idea from a nonfiction piece during both minilessons and weekly shared reading. Again, supporting my readers in utilizing the skill of inferring across all texts strengthens their inferring muscles and allows them to understand a deeper meaning of the text.

Getting the Big Picture: Synthesizing

As proficient readers read, they continually fold their ideas together to create the greatest understanding possible. They use their

Figure 2-8 After spending a week with the text, Tringa records potential conversations she could have about Cynthia Rylant's "Spaghetti" (1985)—or any text, for that matter. Throughout the school year, students like Tringa realize that general themes that exist in the world also exist in different texts. Tringa has moved beyond the literal and narrow confines of the text and is thinking more globally, about themes and bigger ideas in a text.



knowledge and their reading to synthesize the information and ideas at hand. When proficient readers finish a text, they can tell you, in a few words, what the text was mostly about *and* the ideas they have about the text. This reading skill is quite complex, as synthesizing information demands that readers *constantly* revise their thinking as they read. When readers synthesize information, they can put down a text and feel like they own it, meaning that they are able to have an informed and deep conversation about the whole text.

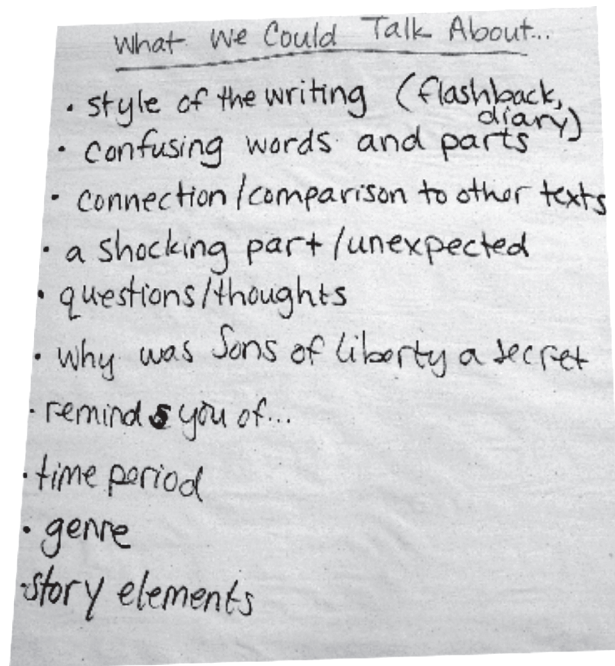
When readers aren't synthesizing, it's written all over their faces. Their engagement in the text wanes, and their reaction to the text falters. Sliding up to a distracted child for a reading conference, I

quickly know that Molly isn't synthesizing the information and ideas from her chapter book because she shares small and trivial details from the story when I probe her for the ideas she's having while she's reading. In a nonfiction text about sharks, an unengaged Mohammed can point to each part of the busy page, sharing facts he's learning while he reads, but he can't tell me what the page is mostly about and what his thinking about the text is. These two students, like many others, are not getting the big picture—they aren't synthesizing while reading and aren't able to engage in accountable talk about the text.

Readers who synthesize monitor their comprehension as they read. They use strategies like rereading, stopping and thinking, jotting notes or underlining text, reading in manageable chunks, and talking to a partner. Through minilessons, I model these fix-it strategies to ensure synthesis and comprehension, but in weekly shared reading, I have students synthesize information and ideas with me, using fix-it strategies as we go. I have come across some readers during my time in the classroom who thought that they weren't supposed to understand what they were reading. Because they didn't understand the text, they didn't know that their comprehension had broken down, and so they didn't know *how* to monitor for meaning and use fix-it strategies. Having my upper-grade readers, especially these struggling readers, work through a text with me, and synthesize information with me, supports them in developing their independence as more fluent readers.

Talk—in a large group, in a small group, or between partners—is one way for readers to express their ideas and thoughts about a text and strengthen their understanding of a text. When readers synthesize as they read, their talk will be about ideas, wonderings, and theories about the heart of the text. On the other hand, imagine Molly engaging in partnership talk, sharing her small details from the text with her partner, or Mohammed sharing facts from his text. Readers can talk about ideas from a text, but they really can't talk about details or facts from a text. Yes, Oliver will perform in the school talent show, and sharks do have a lot of teeth, but what is there to talk about and discuss? It would be quite different if Molly and Mohammed had *ideas* about the details and facts in their texts. As Molly read, if she synthesized the details from *Oliver Button Is a Sissy* (dePaola 1979) and her ideas from the story and said, "Oliver is really brave," she would open up a conversation with her partner. If

Figure 2-9 I describe students' suggestions for potential conversations about the weekly shared reading text *We Are Patriots* (Gregory 2002).



Mohammed synthesized the information and ideas from the text about sharks and said, “Sharks have a lot of teeth to help them survive the dangerous waters,” his partner could respond as well. Solid, accountable talk is grounded in synthesis and ideas that readers have while they read.

Ongoing Reflection

In my classroom, I strive to continuously deepen my students’ reading and thinking work. As I think about Tringa’s progress as a reader, I feel that through weekly shared reading, I was able to explicitly show her *how* to proficiently read a variety of texts. Through the re-

reading of texts and focused practice, she was able to demonstrate the reading skills and strategies that proficient readers utilize when they tackle a variety of text genres and structures. Tringa was pushed to think deeply about texts; she was encouraged to move beyond the literal interpretations of the texts and to move toward big ideas. She was also supported as she tackled new vocabulary in more sophisticated texts. As Tringa encountered increasingly complicated texts, it was critical that she understood how the five essential reading skills were used not in isolation, but interdependently. Weekly shared reading provided the ideal vehicle, allowing me to model the strategies and skills of a proficient reader.

Tringa might remind you of students in your classroom—proficient yet literal, slowly building vocabulary—a solid 3 as measured by the state reading assessment. Weekly shared reading can help push readers like Tringa from a literal reading life to a grander reading life—from a 3 to a 4, from meeting the standard to exceeding it. The interpretive work, scaffolded by class discussion, allows students like Tringa to challenge themselves and open doors in reading that they never knew existed.

Big Ideas from Chapter 2

- Proficient readers integrate five essential reading skills as they read to ensure comprehension of any text.
- Through weekly shared reading, along with other instructional opportunities, reading comprehension strategies that build these five skills are modeled and practiced.