

# WA State Literacy Framework K-6 The Essential Role of Reading in Literacy Development

*This document is a section from the [Washington State Literacy Framework K-6](#). Refer to the main source for more information. If you have policy questions related to the WA State Literacy Framework K-6, please contact [ELA@k12.wa.us](mailto:ELA@k12.wa.us).*

## Reading is a Lifelong Skill

**Reading is a gateway to knowledge, creativity, and personal growth.** When students develop strong reading habits, they gain the ability to think critically, communicate effectively, and engage with the world in meaningful ways. When students receive clear instruction, diverse reading opportunities, and responsive support, they grow into lifelong readers who approach texts with curiosity, confidence, and critical insight.

Reading is at the heart of literacy as a complex cognitive process that requires students to decode text, make meaning from it, and engage with ideas critically. Strong reading skills enable students to access information, think deeply, and participate fully in academic and civic life.

From an early age, students develop the foundational skills necessary to read with accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. As they grow, reading becomes a means of inquiry, reflection, and engagement with the world. Research has consistently shown that reading proficiency is a key predictor of future academic success, making explicit, evidence-based reading instruction essential in the early years and beyond.

## Reading Across Genres and Modalities

Reading is a multimodal process, extending beyond print to include visual, digital, and auditory texts. In today's world, students must navigate a variety of information sources, from traditional books to interactive digital content. Integrating diverse and multimodal texts into instruction equips students to think critically across a range of contexts.

All texts are multimodal, meaning they exist in multiple forms and require different ways of interpreting information. Students must engage with a variety of text types and formats to build well-rounded literacy skills. Incorporating diverse genres and formats provides students with opportunities to read for different purposes, for enjoyment, inquiry, and critical thinking.

In the digital age, students must be able to navigate, interpret, and evaluate a range of digital and multimodal texts. Engaging with these diverse formats prepares them to meet real-world literacy demands and become critical consumers of media and information. Each text type offers unique opportunities to build thinking, language, and understanding across contexts. To



support this development, students need exposure to a wide variety of texts, including but not limited to:

- **Literary Reading:** Stories, novels, poetry, and drama that build imagination, empathy, and cultural awareness.
- **Informational Reading:** Nonfiction, research-based texts, and articles that develop factual knowledge and analytical skills.
- **Argumentative and Persuasive Texts:** Opinion pieces, essays, and debates that teach students how to evaluate evidence and construct logical arguments.
- **Online Articles and Blogs:** Used to inform or entertain. Students can learn to assess credibility and recognize bias.
- **Visual and Media Texts:** Understanding how images, infographics, and videos convey meaning.
- **Audiobooks and Podcasts:** Strengthening listening comprehension and oral language.

## A Research-Based Approach to Reading

The National Reading Panel (2000) identified five essential components of reading instruction, often referred to as the Five Pillars of Reading. These pillars are grounded in decades of research from cognitive psychology, linguistics, and neuroscience, providing a foundation for developing strong readers. The science of reading is grounded in the idea that reading comprehension is built on both word recognition and language comprehension. To become proficient readers, students must develop skills in the five pillars of Reading:

- **Phonemic Awareness:** Recognizing and manipulating sounds in words.
- **Phonics:** Understanding the relationships between letters and sounds to decode words.
- **Fluency:** Reading with accuracy, speed, and expression.
- **Vocabulary:** Understanding the meaning of words and how they are used.
- **Comprehension:** Constructing meaning from text and engaging in deep thinking.

These components work together to support strong, independent readers who can make sense of a variety of texts. Instruction in each area must be explicit, systematic, and developmentally appropriate, ensuring that all students can develop the literacy skills necessary for success regardless of background or learning needs.

*"Comprehension strategies should be taught—and, according to research, should be taught using a gradual release of responsibility approach. That just means that the teacher models and explains when, how, and why to implement the strategies. Then the teacher guides students to use the strategies themselves, turning more and more of the responsibility for that over to them gradually."*

*—Timothy Shanahan*

# Literacy Models and Components of Reading

## Why Reading Models Matter

Reading models provide an evidence-based framework for understanding how literacy develops. They help educators break down the complexity of reading, guiding them in planning effective instruction and interventions. By understanding how different components of reading interact, educators can make informed decisions about curriculum design, assessment, and instructional strategies to support all learners. Research concepts are supported by theoretical models such as The Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) and Scarborough's Reading Rope (2001).

## The Simple View of Reading (SVR): Understanding Reading Comprehension



Figure 1 The Simple View of Reading, Gough, and Tunmer (1986)

The Simple View of Reading (SVR), introduced by Gough and Tunmer (1986), provides a straightforward yet powerful way to understand how reading comprehension develops. This model breaks reading into two essential components that work together to create skilled readers:

This equation (above) shows that both decoding and comprehension must develop together for a student to become a skilled reader. If either is weak, reading comprehension will suffer. Strong readers can both decode words and understand their meaning, as comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading.

- **Word Recognition (Decoding):** Refers to a reader's ability to translate written words into spoken language. It includes skills like recognizing letter-sound relationships, sounding out unfamiliar words, and reading words fluently. Strong decoding skills allow readers to recognize words automatically, reducing the cognitive load required for reading.
- **Language Comprehension:** The ability to understand and make meaning from spoken

language. It involves vocabulary knowledge, background knowledge, grammar, and the ability to make inferences. Even if a child can decode words, they still need strong language comprehension to understand what they read.

## Scarborough's Reading Rope

Developed by Hollis Scarborough (2001), the Reading Rope provides a visual metaphor for how various literacy skills intertwine over time to create skilled readers. This model expands on the Simple View of Reading (SVR) by breaking down reading into multiple, interdependent strands. It illustrates that reading is not a single skill but a complex process requiring word recognition and language comprehension to work together.

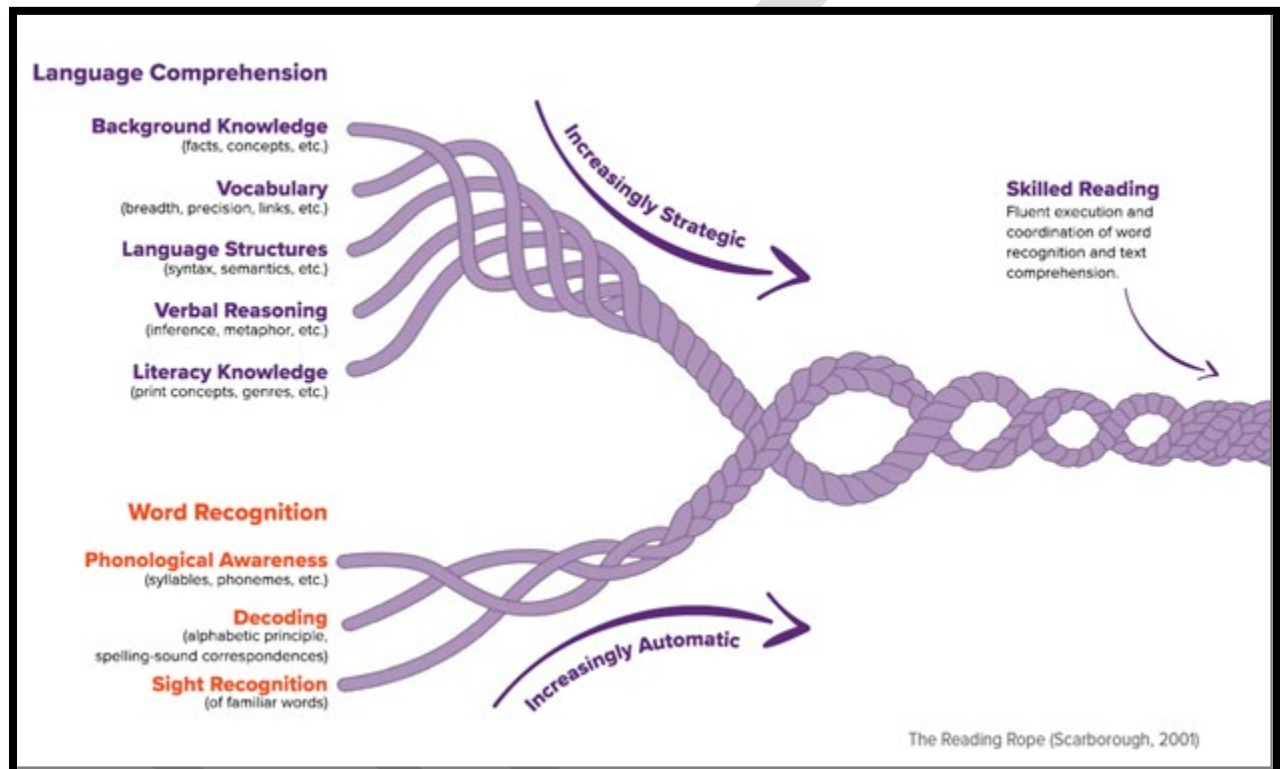


Figure 2 Scarborough's Reading Rope (2001)

**Word Recognition Strands** (The Mechanics of Reading) foundational skills help students decode and recognize words efficiently. Strong word recognition skills allow students to read words fluently, freeing up mental energy to focus on understanding the text. Word recognition skills include:

- **Phonological Awareness:** Recognizing and manipulating sounds in spoken language.
- **Decoding (Phonics):** Understanding letter-sound relationships to read words.
- **Sight Recognition of Familiar Words:** Automatically recognizing familiar and high-frequency words.

**Language Comprehension Strands** (The Meaning of Reading) foundational skills enable students to understand and interpret text. Language Comprehension skills include:

- **Background Knowledge:** Prior knowledge that helps students make sense of what they read.
- **Vocabulary:** Knowing and understanding the meanings of words.
- **Language Structures** (Syntax & Semantics): Understanding sentence structure and meaning.
- **Verbal Reasoning:** Making inferences and drawing conclusions from text.
- **Literacy Knowledge:** Recognizing print features, genres, and text structures.

Together, these skills enable students to make meaning from what they read, connecting new information to what they already know. Scarborough's model emphasizes that reading is a process of growth. This model reminds educators that reading is a complex skill set, not a single ability. In the early stages, each strand develops separately as students build foundational literacy skills. Over time, these strands become more tightly woven, leading to automatic, fluent, and skilled reading.

The Active View of Reading: Expanding the SVR Model.

### Active View of Reading

While the Simple View of Reading (SVR) effectively describes two key components of reading, Duke & Cartwright (2021) argue that it does not account for self-regulation and active engagement in reading. This model acknowledges that reading is not just a passive process but one that requires active cognitive effort and self-monitoring.

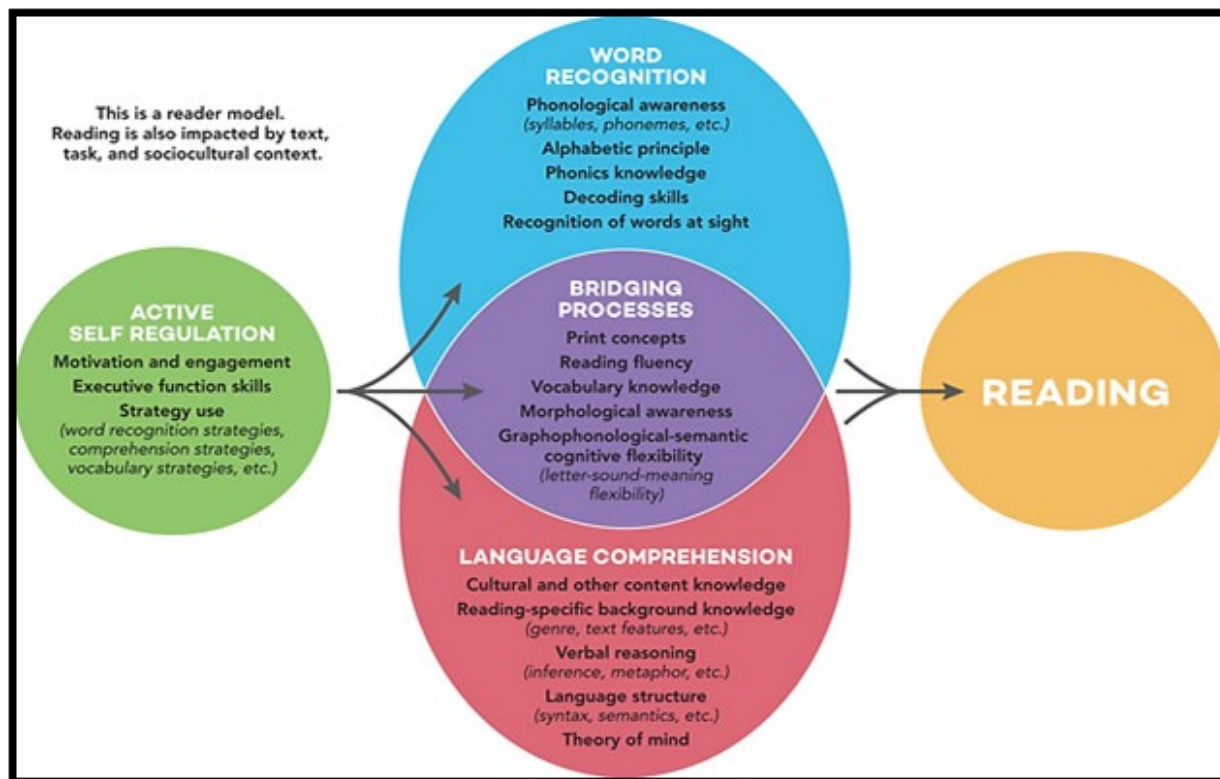


Figure 1 Active View of Reading (2021)

**The Active View of Reading** expands on the SVR by emphasizing:

- **Cognitive Self-Regulation:** Skills that help readers plan, monitor, and adjust their reading strategies (e.g., predicting, summarizing, and visualizing).
- **Strategic Reading Behaviors:** Techniques such as main idea identification, inference-making, and questioning that enhance comprehension.
- **Motivation and Engagement:** The importance of interest, persistence, and self-efficacy in reading success.

## Considering Literacy Models in Proximity to People

While literacy models provide valuable frameworks for understanding the development of reading skills, it is important to recognize that they are simplifications of the complex nature of human literacy. These models offer insights into the components and processes involved in reading, but they do not capture the full depth and richness of human communication. Literacy is a multifaceted and dynamic skill that encompasses more than any single model can represent. Therefore, educators should use these models as guides, while also considering the unique and diverse needs of individual learners.

## The Role of Foundational Skills in Early Literacy

Learning to read is one of the most complex and essential skills a child will develop in their academic career. While comprehension is the ultimate goal of reading, students must first build

the necessary foundational skills that allow them to decode and make sense of text. These foundational skills include phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, and word recognition, all of which support a student's ability to read with confidence and automaticity. Without a strong grasp of these early skills, students may struggle with reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and overall academic success.

Foundational skills serve as the bridge between spoken and written language. Early on when children learn to read, they must first develop the ability to recognize and manipulate the sounds (phonemic awareness) in words. Once they understand that words are made up of individual sounds (phonemes), they can begin to connect those sounds to letters, a process known as phonics. Through explicit systematic instruction and practice, students develop fluency, allowing them to read effortlessly and focus on comprehension rather than decoding each word.

Research confirms the importance of explicit and systematic instruction in foundational skills (National Reading Panel, 2000; IES What Works Clearinghouse, 2016). When taught in a structured way, these skills provide the necessary support for all students, particularly those at risk of reading difficulties, including but not limited to, students with dyslexia. Strong foundational skills instruction ensures that every student can access grade-level texts and participate fully in literacy-rich learning experiences.

## Key Components of Foundational Skills Instruction

### Phonological Awareness: Hearing the Sounds of Language

Before children can read, they must understand that spoken language is made up of smaller sound units. Phonological awareness refers to the ability to hear, identify, and manipulate sounds in words. This includes recognizing rhyming words, syllables, onset-rime patterns, and individual phonemes (sounds).

**Phonemic awareness** is the most advanced form of phonological awareness and is essential for early reading success. Students who struggle to distinguish and manipulate sounds may need additional support and opportunities to practice phonics and decoding words. Instruction should include explicit, engaging activities that help students develop these skills, such as:

- Clapping syllables in words to increase awareness of word structure.
- Identifying and generating rhyming words to recognize sound patterns.
- Segmenting words into individual sounds (e.g., "cat" → /c/ /a/ /t/).
- Blending sounds to form words (e.g., /s/ /u/ /n/ → "sun").

Research from the National Reading Panel (2000) and What Works Clearinghouse (2016) confirms that phonemic awareness instruction significantly improves early reading outcomes, particularly when paired with phonics instruction.

## Phonics: The Relationship Between Letters and Sounds

**Phonics** instruction teaches students how written letters (graphemes) correspond to spoken sounds (phonemes). It is not enough for students to recognize letters; they must understand how letters and letter patterns represent sounds in written language. Phonics allows students to decode unfamiliar words, an essential skill for becoming an independent reader.

Students should be given ample opportunities to apply their phonics skills in connected text rather than isolated drills. Decodable books—texts that include words following phonics patterns students have learned—are a key instructional tool for reinforcing phonics skills in meaningful ways. Research highlights the effectiveness of systematic phonics instruction in preventing and remediating reading difficulties, particularly for students with dyslexia and those at risk for reading failure (Ehri, 2004). Effective phonics instruction is:

- **Explicit:** Directly teaching letter-sound relationships and spelling patterns.
- **Systematic:** Following a carefully planned sequence, moving from simple to complex patterns.
- **Cumulative:** Building upon previously learned skills to support reading fluency.

*"Reading and writing float on a sea of talk."—James Britton (1970)*

## Oral Language is Linked to Reading Comprehension

Strong oral language skills are a prerequisite for reading comprehension. The Listening Comprehension Hypothesis (Hogan, Adlof, & Alonzo, 2014) suggests that listening comprehension skills directly influence reading comprehension skills. Before students can understand written text, they must develop the ability to process and understand spoken language. Research shows that classroom discussions improve both reading comprehension and writing skills by helping students process and articulate their ideas (Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, 2016). Oral language and reading comprehension connections:

- Engage students in read-alouds and discussions about a text.
- Provide opportunities for students to explain their thinking.
- Have students retell stories, describe details and events, and make predictions.
- Use sentence stems and discussion prompts. Provide structured support to help students express complex ideas verbally.

## Fluency: Bridging Word Recognition and Comprehension

Fluency is the ability to read text accurately, smoothly, and with expression. When students develop fluency, they can focus on understanding what they read instead of struggling to decode each word. According to the What Works Clearinghouse (2016), fluency instruction should be integrated with comprehension strategies, ensuring that students read accurately and with meaning. Fluency is not just about speed. It is about effortless reading that supports

comprehension. Developing readers working on fluency often expend so much cognitive effort on decoding that they have little mental energy left for thinking about the meaning of what they read. Fluent reading is built through:

- **Automatic Word Recognition:** Instantly recognizing common words without decoding.
- **Pacing and Accuracy:** Reading at an appropriate speed with minimal errors.
- **Expression (Prosody):** Using tone, pitch, and rhythm to convey meaning.

Evidence-based fluency-building strategies include:

- **Repeated Reading:** Rereading a passage multiple times to improve speed and accuracy.
- **Paired Reading:** Reading aloud with a partner for guided support.
- **Echo Reading:** The teacher reads a passage, and students repeat it with proper phrasing and expression.

### Sight Word Recognition and Fluency

While phonics enables students to decode words, some words do not follow regular spelling patterns and must be recognized instantly. High-frequency words, sometimes referred to as sight words, are words that appear frequently in texts and may not be easily sounded out (e.g., "said," "was," "does").

Teaching students to recognize these words automatically improves reading fluency and confidence. Instead of rote memorization, effective instruction integrates morphology (understanding word parts) and contextual practice, ensuring that students internalize word meanings rather than just memorize spellings.

### Supporting Reading with Multilingual Learners (MLs)

Multilingual students bring valuable linguistic backgrounds that should be leveraged in reading instruction. Research indicates that incorporating students' home languages into literacy instruction can significantly enhance their English reading skills. Best practices include:

- **Providing Scaffolds:** Sentence frames, visual supports, and bilingual texts are tools that help bridge the gap between students' home languages and English, making content more accessible.
- **Explicitly Teaching Academic Vocabulary:** Strengthens comprehension. Academic vocabulary is crucial for understanding complex texts and engaging in higher-level thinking.
- **Encouraging Home Language Literacy:** Supports stronger English reading skills. Studies show that literacy skills in a student's first language can be transferred to their second language, aiding in overall reading development.

### Students with Dyslexia and Reading Difficulty

Students with dyslexia and other reading differences benefit from evidence-based, structured literacy instruction that is responsive to their individual needs. Effective support often includes:

- **Explicit Phonics Instruction and Decodable Texts:** Systematic phonics instruction

helps students understand the relationships between letters and sounds, building a foundation for decoding words effectively. Decodable texts provide accessible reading materials that align with students' phonics knowledge.

- **Multisensory Learning Approaches:** Engaging visual, auditory, and kinesthetic pathways can strengthen students' ability to connect sounds to symbols and support long-term retention.
- **Systems in place at the Building Level for Progress Monitoring and Targeted Interventions:** Consistent progress monitoring, paired with timely and tailored interventions, ensure that students receive the support they need.

## Evidence-Based Practices to Support Foundational Skill Development

### Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade:

- **Phonemic and Phonological Awareness:** Engage students in activities that help them recognize and manipulate sounds in speech. Examples include clapping syllables, identifying rhyming words, segmenting words into individual sounds, and blending sounds to form words.
- **Phonics:** Teach students the relationship between letters and sounds through explicit, systematic, and cumulative instruction. Use decodable books to reinforce phonics skills in meaningful ways.
- **Fluency:** Develop students' ability to read text accurately, smoothly, and with expression. Use strategies like repeated reading, paired reading, and echo reading to build fluency.
- **Word Recognition and Sight Vocabulary:** Help students recognize high-frequency words and understand word parts through word study and contextual practice.

### Continuing Foundational Skills Development in Grades 4–6:

- **Reading Variety:** Provide regular opportunities for students to read different types of texts.
- **World Knowledge:** Help students develop knowledge that is relevant to understanding the passage.
- **Vocabulary Development:** Teach essential words, prefixes, suffixes, and Latin and Greek roots to help students understand word meanings.
- **Fluency:** Teach strategies to decode multisyllabic words and provide practice to read these words accurately and automatically.
- **Answering Questions:** Explicitly teach students how to find and justify answers to different types of questions.
- **Collaborative Discussion:** Provide opportunities for students to discuss and answer questions together.
- **Self-Questioning:** Teach students to ask themselves questions as they read to check their understanding.
- **Reflection:** Provide opportunities for students to reflect on what they have learned.

## Developing Reading Comprehension

While foundational skills provide the mechanics of reading, comprehension is the goal. Comprehension allows students to not only understand what they read but also engage with it personally by analyzing ideas, questioning perspectives, and forming one's own conclusions.

Reading comprehension is an active process that requires students to engage with the text in multiple ways. It involves several key strategies and skills:

- **Making Connections Between the Text and Their Own Knowledge:** Students should relate the content they read to their personal experiences, prior knowledge, and other texts they have encountered. This helps them build a deeper understanding and makes the reading more meaningful.
- **Asking Questions About What They Are Reading:** Encouraging students to ask questions before, during, and after reading helps them stay engaged and think critically about the text. Questions can be about the content, the author's intentions, or the implications of the text.
- **Visualizing, Imagining, or Engaging the Senses to Understand Characters, Settings, and Events:** Visualization techniques, such as creating mental images or drawing scenes from the text, can enhance comprehension by making the reading experience more vivid and memorable.
- **Summarizing and Synthesizing Key Details from the Text:** Summarization involves distilling the main ideas and important details from a text, while synthesis requires combining information from multiple sources to form a coherent understanding. Both skills are essential for effective comprehension.
- **Inferring Meaning Beyond What is Explicitly Stated:** Inference involves reading between the lines to understand the underlying messages, themes, and implications of the text. This skill helps students grasp the deeper meanings and nuances of the reading material.
- **Critically Evaluating Arguments and Perspectives:** Students should analyze the validity and strength of the arguments presented in the text, considering different viewpoints and assessing the evidence provided. This critical thinking skill is crucial for developing informed opinions and making reasoned judgments.
- **Analyzing Syntax and Semantics:** Understanding the structure and meaning of sentences (syntax) and the meanings of words and phrases (semantics) is vital for decoding complex texts and grasping their full significance. This involves recognizing grammatical patterns, word relationships, and contextual meanings.

Effective comprehension instruction includes the direct teaching of these strategies, as well as discussion-based learning where students engage in conversations about texts, deepening their understanding through peer interaction. Research highlights the importance of exposing students to challenging literature, nonfiction, engaging fiction, and academic texts that expand their thinking and prepare them for higher-level literacy demands.

## Evidence-Based Practices for Improving Reading Comprehension

- **Teach Reading Comprehension Strategies:** Introduce and model strategies like predicting, questioning, visualizing, summarizing, and making connections. Encourage students to use these strategies independently and during guided reading sessions.
- **Identify and Use Text's Organizational Structure:** Help students recognize different text structures (e.g., cause and effect, compare-and-contrast, sequence) and use graphic organizers to map out information.
- **Guide Focused Discussions:** Develop questions that require deep thinking about the text. Encourage follow-up questions and structured, small-group discussions to promote critical thinking and deeper comprehension.
- **Select Texts Purposefully:** Choose high-quality texts that are rich in ideas and information. Include multiple genres and ensure that texts are appropriate for students' reading abilities and instructional activities.

**Include Syntactic Awareness:** Teach students about the arrangement of words and phrases to create well-formed sentences. Understanding syntax helps readers comprehend sentence structure and meaning.

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