

# Introduction

It's time for a new model of reading comprehension instruction. Research during the past several decades has resulted in significant increases in understanding about reading comprehension itself (e.g., Israel, 2017). Helping students make meaning from texts is critical to their success, and reading comprehension is one of the oldest lines of inquiry in education; Thorndike noted that comprehension required “a cooperation of many forces” (1917, p. 232). Following a comprehensive review of research, Snow (2002) clarified those forces and noted that comprehension is dependent on four variables:

1. *Reader variables*: age, ability, affect, knowledge bases, motivation
2. *Text variables*: genres, format, features, considerateness
3. *Educational-context variables*: environment, task, social grouping, purpose
4. *Teacher variables*: knowledge, experience, attitude, pedagogical approach

But models for helping teachers develop students' comprehension have not kept pace with the knowledge about what comprehension is. While there are strategies such as modeling or reciprocal teaching, a unifying framework for reading comprehension instruction remains elusive. Importantly, reading comprehension instruction should be more than a pile of strategies. The field needs a structured approach to comprehension instruction. We propose that students need to experience reading comprehension instruction across three phases: skill, will, and thrill (see Figure i.1). When they do, students come to see the instructional experiences their teachers provide them as purposeful. Importantly, they begin to accept responsibility for their learning and understand that struggle is a natural part of the process.



Models of reading instruction

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**Figure i.1 A framework for reading comprehension instruction.**

Level of Focus	Aspects of Reading Instruction
Skill	Phonemic awareness, oral language, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension strategies
Will	Engagement and motivation
Thrill	Taking action and producing

### The *Skill* of Reading Comprehension

The forces that must be mobilized to understand a text are many. In this first phase of reading comprehension instruction, teachers focus on the component parts of reading: oral language, phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and fluency. These components are formulated according to the age and needs of students, with some skills instruction fading as students master them. However, neglecting any one of these processes will very likely result in compromised comprehension. Over time, students increasingly automate these processes, freeing working memory for comprehension. If a student is laboring over individual words, whether because she can't decode them or because he doesn't know what they mean, meaning making is harder and sometimes impossible. When students read laboriously, they rarely pay attention to the meaning and often forget what they read at the start of the sentence or paragraph. Comprehension suffers.

We call these *skills* because we want students to evolve from strategic readers to skilled ones. As Afflerbach et al. (2008) note, "Reading skills operate without the reader's deliberate control or conscious awareness. . . . This has important, positive consequences for each reader's limited working memory" (p. 368). Strategies, on the other hand, are "effortful and deliberate" and occur during initial learning, and when the text becomes more difficult for the reader to understand (p. 369).

At the skill level, specific comprehension strategies are introduced, such as monitoring, predicting, summarizing, questioning, and inferring. Noticing when meaning is lost is a useful skill, especially when the reader has fix-up strategies. Similarly, summarizing information in a text, asking questions during reading, and making inferences likely improve a reader's comprehension of a text.

Importantly, comprehension strategies cannot compensate for lack of background knowledge or vocabulary. Imagine trying to predict or visualize while reading the following sentence from a physics textbook: “Plane potential flow supplemented by the inclusion of circulation is of considerable practical importance” (Joos, 1986, p. 207). You can decode all the words and read it fluently. You even know the general meaning of the vocabulary. But without knowledge of the discipline, meaning is elusive, and knowing a host of comprehension strategies doesn’t help.

### The Will of Comprehension Instruction

When reading comprehension is reduced to a set of skills, many students simply don’t read, even when they might otherwise. And we are not just referring to reading outside of school, an important effort for increasing reading volume. We are alluding to students who skim a text simply to find answers, or avoid reading tasks altogether. The *will* level of reading comprehension focuses on students’ mindsets about reading. These approaches invite them to engage more fully with texts. Efforts aligned with building the will dimension of reading comprehension center on creating the mental attitude, inclination, habit, or disposition that predetermines a students’ willingness to engage in reading. In other words, the will of comprehension relates to student engagement and motivation to read and understand. Reading comprehension instruction oriented to *goals*, *choice*, and *relevance* contribute to will.

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Far too often, students abandon reading when the text is complex. A common misconception is that reading should always be easy, and that struggle must be avoided. In fact, productive failure is widely understood as a necessary component of the problem-solving process. And reading is problem solving. There are times when we grapple with ideas, and we persevere to make sense. That is not to say that first graders should be reading *War and Peace*, but rather that struggle should be seen as natural and that sometimes the texts we read are challenging. Overcoming appropriately challenging tasks fuels a sense of pride and accomplishment, important ingredients in motivation.

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Challenge is crucial for goal setting, itself a powerful influence on learning. After all, we don’t set goals for things we already do well.

We set goals for things we want to achieve but have not yet attained. But all goals are not created equally. *Mastery goals* are focused on increasing competence, whereas *performance goals* are focused on demonstrating the skill and ability of a student. Performance goals are much less motivating—getting a good grade on an essay is not likely to increase a student’s will to read. Writing a clear and coherent essay is primarily a mastery goal, even though it is also likely to result in a good grade. Helping students establish mastery goals can positively impact their will. We have seen students set goals to understand an Emily Brontë novel (e.g., “My goal is to understand the ways the author uses the unreliable narrator device in *Wuthering Heights*”) and with science texts (e.g., “My goal is to use the information in the main part of the article with what’s listed in the diagrams.”). Students don’t independently generate goals like these. Rather, they are the product of success criteria developed by the teacher. Mastery goals that illustrate the criteria for success in the lesson illuminate the incremental progress students are making in their learning.

Another dimension of will in reading comprehension is the use of choice. Sending students home to read the whole class novel is counter to developing their will to read and comprehend. There is nothing wrong with studying texts in class, but increasing choice will increase the number of students who actually read. Imagine focusing on a genre, topic, or theme and creating a list of 10 titles that will allow students to master the standards. Simply increasing choice can increase will.

### The Thrill of Comprehension

The final phase of our framework focuses on the excitement that students should experience when they comprehend a text. Thrill in this context refers to the ways in which students can use the information or experience of reading and comprehending in service of something else. We discovered this phase when we started asking students, “What does the text inspire you to do?”

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Over time, we have come to realize that students need to experience the thrill of comprehension if they are to accept the challenge of developing their skills and putting forth the will to understand. Richard Anderson (personal communication, June 18, 2019), a pioneer in reading research, argued that we needed new metaphors for

the purpose, or thrill, of reading. Students should be speaking, thinking, and doing things. Anderson argued that the new roles might be of storyteller, explainer, or arguer.

Imagine the power of writing Amazon.com or Goodreads.com reviews rather than book reports. Or the impact of presenting information to others and seeing something change, or debating ideas or engaging in a Socratic seminar. There are all kinds of ways that students can be invited into the thrill of comprehension. But all of the options we have discovered involve students becoming producers and sharing their thinking with others.

### Why This Book

Simply comprehending the text is no longer the point of comprehension instruction. Too many students are stuck at the skill level, with their teachers working very hard to develop students' strengths in this area. A more comprehensive framework for comprehension instruction recognizes that skills are not enough. We would be wise to ensure students' engagement and motivation, developing their will to understand. And, ultimately, we show them that reading and reading comprehension are not passive experiences. Rather, students come to understand that the point of all of this work is to do something with the information. To our thinking, students need lessons on all three levels if we are going to radically change their learning from texts. And that's what we hope to accomplish with this book.

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