

What do we understand about understanding text?

Comprehension is not a skill you teach. It's what happens when an assortment of interacting processes engage at once, fast enough to be seamless. Let go of any one of them and comprehension gets compromised.¹ So, what do readers need to comprehend written text?

01 **FLUENCY** Effortless Word Reading

Decoding so automatic it no longer registers as work. Until word recognition runs below the level of conscious attention, there is nothing left over to think with. **Fluency is the price of admission to meaning.**

03 **VERBAL REASONING** Reading Between the Lines

The text says less than it means, on purpose. Inference, metaphor, and irony are where comprehension turns into **insight: reading across the lines, not just along them.**

05 **SENTENCES** Language Structures

Syntax, morphology, and the architecture of meaning. Knowing the words is not the same as knowing how they combine. **Structure is what tells you who did what to whom.**

07 **MOTIVATION** Leaning In

A reader has to **want to make meaning**. Curiosity, engagement, and the willingness to stay with a hard text are what turn skill into understanding. A reader who cares reads past the point where the unengaged give up.

02 **COHERENCE** Ideas That Hang Together

Meaning doesn't stop at the period. Pronoun references, transitions, and structure bind separate sentences into a whole. **You can understand every sentence and still lose the thread.**

04 **KNOWLEDGE** Background Knowledge

You cannot comprehend what you have **no schema for**. The more a reader already knows about the world, the less the text has to spell out, and the more it can mean.

06 **VOCABULARY** A Web of Words

Not a word list. **A network**. Depth, precision, and the dense web of associations behind each word are what let a reader grasp shades of meaning the sentence never states outright.

08 **ATTENTION** Staying With It

The executive function beneath the rest: sustaining focus, holding ideas in **working memory**, and managing the **cognitive load** a text demands. Overload either one and comprehension is the first thing to slip.

¹ Adapted from Scarborough, H. S. (2001), *The Strands of Skilled Reading*, and extended with the executive-function and bridging processes of Duke & Cartwright's *Active View of Reading* (2021).