

Literacy Tips



Tips for middle school educators on various topics such as grammar, writing, reading, spelling, vocabulary, cooperative learning and more.

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Tip #81: Deeper Comprehension

We seem to spend a lot of time planning strategies for our struggling readers and writers. This tip is devoted to challenging all of our students including our very brightest. All of the ideas come from a new book by Kelly Gallagher called *Deeper Reading: Comprehending Challenging Texts, 4-12*. [Attached is the model Gallagher uses](#) for teaching challenging text. He devotes each chapter of his book to a step in the process. I had trouble eliminating ideas, so I describe three for each of the steps below. Yes, this is a long tip.

Framing the Text

- *Focus Poems* - Let students read thematically related poetry before beginning a new book. From the poems, students make inferences about what they are going to be reading. A focus poem for *Journey to Topaz* might be "Executive Order 9066," a poem found in the 8th grade Holt, *Elements of Literature*.
- *The Word Game* - Write a single word on the board. Ask students to explain its significance from the reading that was required the day before. This can not only serve as a reading check but also get students to think bigger. Change the word for each period so it keeps students honest. For *Journey to Topaz* (chapter 1), you might choose the word prisoners and expect students to write about how the

FBI comes to the Sakane family house to arrest the father.

- *One Question/One Comment* - Students are required to bring in one question and one comment based on the previous day's reading assignment. Begin with a random student who chooses to read his comment or his question. The next student has the choice to respond to the comment, answer the question, or branch out with his/her own question or comment. As this chain of discussion continues around the classroom, it gets everybody participating and helps build comprehension in the students who might be struggling.

Read Carefully (First Draft Reading)

- *Twenty Questions* – Getting through the first chapter of any book can be problematic for an immature reader. This is most likely where comprehension falls apart and we lose them. To model that good readers are aware of the confusion often associated with "first chapters," have students generate a list of Twenty Questions. Their questions should literally be all of the confusing points within the first chapter. Use these in a discussion to clarify the answers.
- *Reader's Welfare* – Do we come to the rescue of students too soon when they say



they didn't read something because it was too hard or they didn't get it? It's an all too familiar scenario in our classrooms. Instead we should get students to reread and show us where they didn't get something. Make a student verbalize at which part on the page they were confused. If necessary, go word by word showing them that they understand more than they really think. Often it is a case of lack of concentration.

- *Scoring Comprehension* - Choose a passage of some length and ask students to read a section at a time. This might mean a paragraph for struggling readers or an entire section for more advanced readers. Have them score their comprehension on a scale of 1 – 10. Continue reading the entire passage scoring each section as you go along. Students should then be directed to spend most of their rereading energy on the sections that they scored low for comprehension. The scoring itself will help students focus better and help them understand that the reading process is a dynamic one for all kinds of readers.

Return to the Text (Second Draft Reading)

- *Three Questions* – There are really only three questions we need to ask students after they have read something. 1). What does it say? 2). What does it mean? 3). What does it matter?
- *Literary Dominoes* – Introduce the idea of a literary plot is like a game of dominoes. Use a picture book that easily shows that this event caused this to happen which caused this to happen. Record these events on sketches of dominoes placed all in a row. Then apply this idea to challenging text; however, ask students to find the literary dominoes by going backwards. In doing this, they can quickly see what events led to the resolution, etc.
- *Responsibility Pie Charts* – Asking students to consider which characters are most responsible for the book's outcome deepens comprehension. After reading *Nothing but the Truth* by Avi, ask students to determine what percentage of the pie graph should be allocated to each character's role in Miss Narwin's retirement and Phillip Malloy's transfer to a new school.

Collaboration

- *Silent Exchange* – After reading a passage, students write an open-ended question at the top of a sheet of paper. Organize a group paper pass giving students 2-minutes to respond to each paper that is passed around. As papers go around the group, the responder sees not only the initial question but several other students' responses, too.
- *Save the Last Word for Me* – Encourage group members to write a thought-provoking passage from the text being read in large print on a piece of paper. One student silently holds up his/her mini-poster for the group giving each member an opportunity to respond to it orally. After everyone has commented, the student holding the passage gets to have the final word expressing why he/she chose the passage as well as responds to any other comments that were made.
- *Theme Triangles* – After reading a book, have groups work together to select the theme. Encourage students to write a theme statement. (Instead of the word racism, a group might write that remarkable courage is needed to stand up to the evils of racism.) Each group



chooses a movie to watch that addresses a similar theme. They must obtain parent permission and view the movie on their own time. Each group also finds one more example of the theme in some other genre that comes from the modern world. Poems, speeches, newspaper articles, etc. will surface. Students then record these onto a large triangle with the theme in the center and each angle representing 1) the book that was read, 2) the movie that was viewed, and 3) the related genre piece that was analyzed. Students present these group Theme Triangles to the class.

Metaphorical and Reflective Responses

- *Introducing Metaphor Thinking* – Brainstorm a list of intangible items on the left-hand side of a T-chart. On the right-hand side, have students brainstorm a list of random tangible items. Have students complete the following sentence by selecting one intangible item and one tangible item and then explore the relationship between the two.

(Intangible item) is like a (tangible item) because _____.

Example: *Friendship is like a driver's license because it will expire if you do not renew it.*

Then work on extending and stretching them.

(Intangible item) is like a (tangible item) because _____, and _____.

Example: *Friendship is like a driver's license because it will expire if you do not renew it, it takes skill to obtain it, and it requires that you pass a test.*

- *With or Without Metaphor?* – Illustrate the effects of using metaphor in writing by copying a poem full of metaphor on the left-hand side of a piece of paper. On the right-handed side, copy the same poem removing the metaphors and rewriting the poet's message in plain language. Allow students time to discuss which version of the poem they like better and why.
- *Most Valuable Idea* – After finishing a major work, have students write what they think is the single most important idea found in the book at the top of their paper. In a T-chart beneath, students use the left-hand column to affix an example in the real-world such as a newspaper article that illustrates this idea. In the right-hand column, students explain the connection between the idea found in the book and the real-world example. (Look at *Dateline Troy* by Paul Fleischman for a full-length book that uses this approach.)



Figure 2.1

