

## Fictional Reading Comprehension Strategies



Many comprehension difficulties stem from decoding issues. Human attention is limited. If a reader's attention is on identifying letter sounds/letter combinations, he/she has limited short term memory available for focusing upon understanding what was read. As word attack skills progress and are mastered, a child's short term memory is able to shift from decoding to a focus on meaning

Although fluent decoding is at the core of many comprehension difficulties, it is not the only issue. As Nanci Bell reveals in her book Visualizing and Verbalizing, some readers struggle creating the mental pictures necessary to understand the main idea of a text. Her work, along with author Cris Tovani (I Read It, but I Don't Get It) has broken ground in helping numerous students understand what they are reading by employing the strategies strong readers use when they struggle to understand a text. Having used many of their suggestions, I strongly encourage others to read and implement their ideas.

That said, I would like to add one other comprehension strategy which has proven to be very powerful. *All fictional stories are about characters and their motives. A character's motive is what he wants or needs or doesn't want. A story's action revolves around how characters try to get what they want or need and the obstacles blocking them from achieving it. Remember that motive (wants/needs) directs a character's action.* If we don't know what a character wants/needs we won't understand his behavior. Even students who don't easily comprehend or visualize can usually identify with wanting or needing something and trying to get it. In my experience, if the comprehension strategies for fiction always include a focus on each character and his/her motives, children are not only able to understand the action, but can predict and summarize with amazing accuracy.

Predicting involves locating what a character wants or needs and deciding if he might get it and **how** he could get it.

Summarizing involves explaining what the characters wanted/needed, the obstacles which blocked their motives and how they got what they wanted/needed at the end (or if they were transformed because they could not achieve their motives).

Most children who struggle with fictional comprehension are overwhelmed with the amount of text and do not know which story element to focus on. Motive is the lost key. Once a student (who can decode) begins to search for motive and the character's corresponding actions, comprehension is unlocked and meaning becomes clear.