

Comprehension

Concepts and Skills

Readers who approach reading a text by looking only at individual words will have difficulty understanding the meaning of connected text. At the same time, readers who cannot attach meanings to words or group those words into meaningful phrases and sentences will not even have a starting point for being able to understand what they read. For this reason, the component skills of alphabets, vocabulary, and fluency are necessary—though not sufficient—for constructing meaning. Instructors should carefully assess adult learners, especially those reading at the intermediate level, to determine how these component skills may be affecting comprehension. Comprehension-specific skills and strategies will also need to be taught.

Reading comprehension involves the construction of different levels of meaning—both literal and inferential—from printed text. The act of constructing this meaning involves several interacting factors:

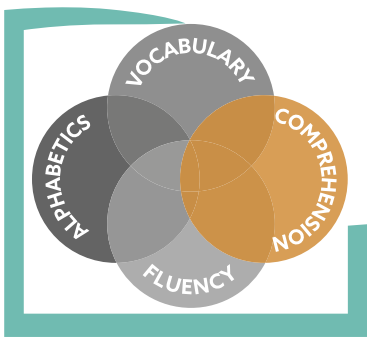
- **The reader:** his or her background knowledge, and reason for reading
- **The text being read:** its topic, ideas, organization, language features, text features, and design
- **The activity of reading:** whether printed on paper or in an electronic form, quickly or slowly, deeply or superficially, alone or with others

Key reading comprehension concepts and skills for teaching adult learners at the beginning and intermediate levels are described below.

LITERAL AND INFERENTIAL MEANING

Reading educators typically talk about two distinct types of meaning. **Literal meaning** is what is stated explicitly in a text. Questions that cue learners to literal meaning may be called “right there” questions, because the learner can find the answer in the text, by pointing to the words or sentences that answer the question.

Inferential meaning requires the reader to make connections between what is stated in the text and other information, concepts, or ideas that may or may not be stated in the text, and to interpret what the author intended to express. Questions that cue learners to inferential meaning may be called “think and search” questions, as the learner may need to connect information and ideas from different parts of the text. Inferential questions may also require the learner to rely on background knowledge to interpret the underlying meaning of the text.



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READER CONSIDERATIONS

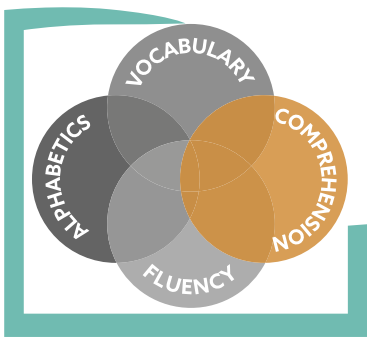
Reader considerations refer to factors within the reader that impact comprehension. An important consideration is the reader's knowledge of **alphabetics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension strategies**. This is why diagnostic assessment is so important: it helps to tease out how the various components are affecting comprehension.

Another consideration is why the reader is reading a particular text in the first place. Skilled readers always have a **purpose** for reading. Purpose affects what readers want to understand and how they go about gaining that understanding.

Some examples of purposes, reading approaches, and sample texts are provided in the chart below.

Reader's Purpose	Approach	Sample Texts
Find specific information	Scan the text for the relevant information	Schedules, bills, menus, TV or movie listings
Follow instructions or directions	Read each step, possibly rereading to put the steps into memory	Instructions, directions, procedures, recipes
Learn about a topic (to take a test or share with others)	Read carefully, following information and ideas across the text, and possibly taking notes or summarizing	Newspaper or magazine articles, informational guides, histories, biographies, academic textbooks or papers
Pleasure	Read carefully in some parts, perhaps skimming others, following information and ideas across the text, and perhaps reading aloud to others	Stories, novels, poems, plays, autobiographies, personal essays

Background knowledge is another important reader consideration. Background knowledge refers to the **world, content-area, and/or topic** knowledge a reader already possesses and uses to make sense of text. It is sometimes called **prior knowledge**. Research has shown that background knowledge can play a stronger role in reading comprehension than the skills a reader has. It is an often-overlooked factor in reading comprehension but is one that requires attention when planning reading instruction.



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TEXT CONSIDERATIONS

Parallel to the reader's purpose, the author of a text has a purpose for writing it. Four common purposes are to 1) explain, 2) describe, 3) persuade, and 4) entertain. These purposes guide the way the author structures the information or ideas in the text and selects specific elements of language (such as vocabulary, verb tenses, and sentence structures). Comprehension relies on a reader interpreting the features and structures an author has selected and composed.

Different **text types** (also known as genres) correspond to authors' purposes at the broadest level. Text types can be termed and categorized in different ways. The College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education provide the following categorization:

- Informational texts (literary nonfiction and historical, scientific, and technical texts)
- Literature (stories, drama, and poetry)

Text structures reflect the way the author organizes information and ideas in the text. Examples of text structures include:

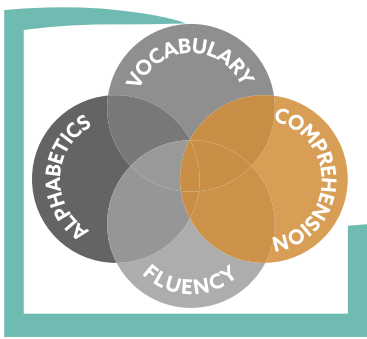
- Sequence/chronological order
- Classification
- Definition
- Process
- Description
- Comparison
- Cause/effect
- Problem/solution

Text features are components provided by an author, editor, or graphic designer to guide the reader in understanding the location and organization of content or to emphasize certain aspects of it.

Examples of text features include:

- Captions
- Bold print
- Headings
- Subheadings
- Tables of contents
- Indexes
- Glossaries
- Sidebars
- Electronic menus and icons

Another factor related to text is **text complexity**. Text complexity is affected by the organization of the text but also by the language used. Short sentences are typically easier to read than long ones (barring the inclusion of dense information or metaphorical ideas). Short words are typically easier to



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read than longer ones. Common, concrete vocabulary is typically easier to comprehend than more rare, abstract, or technical vocabulary. Teachers can use techniques discussed in the *Diagnostic Assessment and Text Selection* module to analyze text complexity.

TASK CONSIDERATIONS

Besides the reader and text considerations, aspects of the **reading task** itself can impact the reader's experience. For instance, although a text may be highly complex, a reader may just want a key piece of information from it. Perhaps he is only interested in the birthdate of a famous president. That information might be found rather easily in a lengthy Internet article. Similarly, finding the due date for a utility bill payment may be a rather easy task, compared to reading the fine print on the back of the bill.

Other factors that might impact a reading task include:

- whether the text is printed on paper or appears in an electronic form
- how “high-stakes” the outcomes are
- where the reading is taking place (quietness of home or by an open window at a busy intersection).

During reading instruction, teachers use their knowledge of the readers and the text as well as the potential dynamics related to the task to craft opportunities for deepening their learners' comprehension abilities.