

826 Boston Tutor Tips

How to Help Students Build Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is an incredibly important and foundational skill for students to develop, and has a far-reaching impact on their academics as they move from learning to read to reading to learn.

Here are some tips to help you succeed in helping your students grow!

Keep in mind, modeling any of the below strategies is also very effective in normalizing them and teaching them to students. These are strategies all readers can use.

Tip #1: Activate Prior Knowledge and Look Out for Barriers

Whether the student is reading fiction or nonfiction, talking about what they (and you!) already know about the subject or story at hand sets them up to be successful in understanding the text better and making helpful connections. It also helps the tutors know where students might need some more background information.

Try:

“What do you know about snakes already?”

“I haven’t read this book—what’s happened so far?”

“What words on this page look new? Let’s skim it and find a few.”

“That word means...”

Tutors can also encourage students to review the text for new words and define them in advance so they understand the text in a deeper and more fluid way. Our brains are programmed to fill in the gaps in our understanding, and so students often don’t even realize when they have made a good but incorrect guess as to the meaning of a word or phrase.

Tip #2: Break Up and Discuss the Text with the Student

Encourage students to pause in their reading every so often to review what the text is saying and to imagine the “movie” of what is happening in their mind. Sometimes pausing every sentence is appropriate, sometimes every paragraph. Keep it conversational by making connections: no one likes to feel they are being quizzed or judged while reading!

Connecting the text to the student’s interests where possible also makes reading more interesting and personal to the students, which will help them to remember the content better.

Try:

“What did we learn here?” [Then connect to background knowledge or new questions.]

“What questions does that bring up for you?”

“If her shoulders are slumped like this and she’s mumbling, ‘Fine,’ what do you think is happening for her right now?”

“Have you ever...?” or “Does that make you wonder...?”

Tip #3: Have the Student Return to the Text & Re-read

If you find a gap in a student’s understanding, prompt them to look back at the text to find the answer. You can stimulate their memory, point to general areas of the text that would be helpful, and teach them how to skim for keywords. If they are still having trouble, ask guiding questions that still allow them to find the answers for themselves.

Try:

“Didn’t the author say something about [...] somewhere near the beginning?”

“Let’s look on the page for where they mention [keyword].”