

Good and Poor Readers

What Do Good Readers Do As They Read?

One way that researchers have studied what good readers do, has been to ask them to think aloud as they read. From these studies, researchers have determined that the seemingly effortless activity described as “good reading” is made up of a set of highly complex, well-developed, and well-practiced skills and abilities. Particularly impressive is the way in which good readers actively and consciously coordinate these skills and strategies before, during and after reading a text.

Before reading, good readers tend to set goals for their reading. They note the structure, or organization of the text, and often create a mental overview or outline of the text to help them decide whether it is relevant to their goals.

During reading, good readers read words accurately and quickly, and simultaneously deal with the meanings of those words – as well as the meanings of the phrases and sentences into which the words are grouped. Good readers connect the meaning of one sentence to the meaning of another. If something is confusing to them, they use their background knowledge to try to clarify the meanings of words and phrases. Sometimes good readers interact with the text by asking themselves questions about its content and reflecting on its ideas. They are adept at using their background knowledge to make predictions about what might happen next and to understand ideas as they encounter them. Good readers continuously evaluate their predictions and revise them as needed.

Good readers are selective as they read. They are likely to focus more of their attention on the parts of the text that are most closely tied to their reading goals. They may decide to skip some parts of a text because they already understand the content or because they do not think the parts are important to what they need (or want) to learn from the text. They may decide, after reading several pages, to skip the rest of the chapter because they recently read something similar. On the other hand, they may decide – either because they do not clearly understand the content or because they find the topic interesting – to reread a passage or chapter before going on. They also may summarize the content of a passage as they read it. In doing so, they may consciously determine what is important, what is supportive, and what is less important.

As they read, good readers often make inferences. They may draw on their background knowledge or look for cues in the text to supply information about characters or events that the author has not provided directly. Some good readers may also create mental images, or visualize a setting, event, or character to help them understand a passage in a text.

Good readers monitor their comprehension as they read. When they realize that they do not understand what they are reading, they apply procedures to “repair” or “fix-up” their lack of understanding. For example, they may ask themselves questions about the meaning of what they are reading, they may rephrase a passage in their own words, they may look up the meanings of difficult words, or they may outline the content of the text.

After reading, good readers often think about, or reflect on what they read. They may mentally summarize major points or events in the text, or even go to other sources to find additional information about the topic of the reading.

In short, good readers are most often strategic readers. That is, they use a number of comprehension strategies to get meaning from text. Comprehension strategies are conscious plans or procedures that are under the control of a reader, who makes decisions about which strategies to use and when to use them.

In addition, good readers engage in metacognition as they read. Cognition refers to mental functions such as remembering, focusing attention, and processing information. Metacognition refers to people's awareness of their cognition; that is, their thoughts about their own thinking. From an array of possibilities, for example, readers with metacognitive awareness are able consciously and automatically to select the appropriate comprehension strategies for use with a particular text.

How Do Poor Readers Differ From Good Readers?

In contrast to good readers, most poor readers do not read strategically. Nor do they have sufficient metacognitive awareness to develop, select, and apply strategies that can enhance their comprehension of text.

Typical poor readers rarely prepare before reading. They often begin to read without setting goals. They seldom consider how best to read a particular type of text.

During reading, poor readers may have difficulty decoding, and so have difficulty reading the words of their texts accurately. In addition, some poor readers read too slowly, or lack fluency. As a result of their slow, labored reading, they often do not comprehend much of what they read, and the attention they have to give to figuring out the words keeps them from understanding the text's message.

All too often poor readers lack sufficient background knowledge about the topic of a text. They may have trouble connecting the ideas of a text. They often are not familiar with the vocabulary they encounter, and have trouble determining word meanings. Further, even when poor readers possess relevant background knowledge, they frequently are not able to activate it to help them understand what they read.

Some poor readers also are unaware of text organization. They do not know enough about the organizational structure of narratives or the various organizational structures of expository texts to help them read and understand.

After reading, poor readers typically do not think about or reflect upon what they have read. They almost never seek out additional information about a topic.

The cumulative effect of these difficulties is that poor readers often lose confidence in their ability to read. Because reading is difficult for them, poor readers cannot and do not read widely. As a result, they are exposed to much less text than are good readers and so receive much less practice reading. Further, the practice they do receive is often frustrating, because many of the texts they are asked to read are too difficult for them.

The question then is: How can classroom reading instruction help poor readers – indeed all students – become more like good readers? Research suggests that the answer may lie in providing students with instruction that both teaches them comprehension strategies that work so well for good readers and helps them to develop the necessary metacognitive awareness of how and when to use these strategies.