

10-1-1989

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### Recommended Citation

Brown, D. L., & Briggs, L. (1989). Success in Reading: Four Characteristics of Strategic Readers. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 30 (1). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol30/iss1/4](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol30/iss1/4)

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# Success in Reading: Four Characteristics of Strategic Readers

**David L. Brown**  
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Reading is a complex process which involves the coordination of a multitude of skills. Strategic readers can be distinguished from the less-skilled readers by their methods of interacting with text. The mental processes of good readers must be understood in order to make assumptions concerning the nature of reading.

In the primary grades, most students are taught word attack skills and vocabulary. However, Durkin (1978-1979) found that adequate instruction was not being given to comprehension. Without instruction, many children do not develop the advanced strategies needed for fluent reading.

Several significant differences between fluent and less-skilled readers have been identified. This article will list and discuss four characteristics of strategic readers.

## **Effective Readers**

Brown (1982) referred to effective readers as those students who have some awareness of and control over their cognitive reading skills. Interviews with children concerning their reading knowledge revealed vague and often inaccurate conceptions of reading (Clay, 1979). The less-skilled readers showed little awareness of the need to use different strategies for variations in reading purposes and texts. On the other

hand, the good readers used the knowledge of structure and content to increase reading efficiency.

Strategic readers have the following four characteristics;

- They establish goals for reading.
- They select reading strategies appropriate for the text.
- They monitor their reading to determine whether comprehension is occurring.
- They have a positive attitude toward reading.

## **Establishing Reading Goals**

Establishing a goal for reading is a prerequisite for monitoring the reading process and planning appropriate strategies for understanding the text. By setting goals, students are able to generate hypotheses and formulate expectations which will guide their reading. Anderson and Armbruster (1982) suggested that surveying the text and determining the goal can improve both enjoyment and comprehension. Seeing a definite need for goals, Stauffer (1969) emphasized the importance of goal setting in his Directed Reading-Thinking Activity. As a result of setting goals, students gain experience in structuring the specific objectives which will guide and aid them in reading.

Reading must be goal-directed because readers must determine strategies for utilizing texts in various ways and must establish appropriate goals. Once goals are formulated, students will be able to make use of their knowledge of the topic. These goals, either explicit or implicit, general or specific, can influence children's understanding of text.

In general, good readers are constantly determining reasons for reading, then reading to achieve these purposes,

and, finally, rereading to confirm understanding of text. This cognitive process requires readers to depend heavily upon their experiential background to comprehend what they are reading.

## **Appropriate Reading Strategies**

Thorndike (1917) recognized the need for developing reading strategies:

*Understanding a paragraph is like solving a problem in mathematics. It consists in selecting the right elements of the situation and putting them together in the right relations, and also with the right amount of weight or influence or force for each. The mind is assailed as it were by every word in the paragraph. It must select, repress, soften, emphasize, correlate and organize, all under the influence of the right mental set or purpose or demand. (Thorndike, 1917, p. 329)*

Children need to be taught various reading strategies that can be utilized for different texts.

In a study of fourth-grade readers, Myers and Paris (1978) found that good readers asked more questions and used more aids in reading than poor readers. Poor readers usually asked only about the pronunciation of new words. This study found that poor readers failed to realize the need for being strategic readers.

Strategic behavior is essential for the comprehension of difficult texts. Therefore children should be taught when to skim for main ideas or scan for particular information. They must recognize the need to read quickly or slowly, carefully or casually, silently or aloud (Kleiman, 1982), and when to apply these reading strategies. Selecting appropriate reading strategies is a skill that good readers learn to utilize effectively.

## Monitoring Comprehension

Recently there has been growing interest by cognitive psychologists in readers' metacognitive knowledge. Metacognition is a knowledge of and a conscious attempt to control one's own cognitive processes (Flavell, 1979). During the reading process, the pupil, the task, and the strategy used are key factors to be evaluated according to the metacognitive model (Baker, 1979). In analyzing reading comprehension, teachers must give consideration to what readers know about the gaining of meaning, how readers self-regulate the search for meaning, and what strategies to employ if the reader fails to understand. This process is known as comprehension monitoring.

Baker (1979) has described monitoring:

*Comprehension monitoring involves the evaluation and regulation of one's own ongoing comprehension processes. To evaluate is to keep track of the success with which comprehension is proceeding and to regulate is to ensure that the process continues smoothly, including taking remedial action when comprehension fails. (Baker, 1979, p. 365)*

Good readers appear to be more proficient at monitoring their understanding of text than poor readers. For example, Swanson (1988) found that better readers were more likely to use higher level strategies, such as inferencing, to obtain meaning from text than less skilled readers. When failing to comprehend text, good readers begin to employ subconsciously a number of strategies to self-regulate their search for meaning. Common strategies include rereading of the text and drawing from prior knowledge to assist in obtaining meaning. According to Johnston (1983), the failure to gain meaning can occur at the word, sentence, or discourse level.

In order to become successful users of comprehension

monitoring, readers must have three competencies. First, they must be able to assess the present state of their knowledge, including what they know and what they do not know about the encountered text. Next, they must be knowledgeable about various elements of text. Finally, they must have the strategic knowledge to select the necessary information to reach meaning (Baker, 1979).

Some techniques have been identified that can be used to determine whether comprehension monitoring is occurring. For example, Baker (1979) recommended three strategies: 1) ask readers to imagine hypothetical reading situations and how they would perform; 2) ask readers what they are doing while actually reading; 3) assess the ongoing comprehension monitoring by using a variety of performance measures.

Children "who successfully monitor their comprehension of text know when they understand, when they don't understand, and when they partially understand" (Baker, 1979). Markman (1979) studied comprehension by presenting third, fifth, and sixth graders with passages containing incomplete or inconsistent information. When awareness of comprehension problems was assessed, the younger children were found to be less likely than the older children to realize the extent of their understanding.

Myers and Paris (1978) surveyed a group of second-grade pupils to determine the strategies utilized when an unknown word was encountered. The most common action was to skip the word. Other strategies included looking back at the text, rereading, and asking for assistance. Comprehension monitoring does not seem to be a skill that automatically develops with maturity; rather, this monitoring tends to be highly dependent on the children's knowledge and experience in

dealing with texts. In a later study, Paris and Myers (1981) found that poor readers remembered less than good readers from stories read aloud and were not even aware of their failure in comprehending text. Surprisingly, Baker (1979) found that many college students also lacked this essential skill.

Successful comprehension monitoring requires the detection of unknown or inconsistent information and an awareness of strategies that can be utilized to alleviate the problem. Effective readers are able to monitor their own comprehension and take the necessary steps to cope successfully with difficulties encountered in comprehending text.

### **A Positive Attitude Toward Reading**

The children's attitudes toward reading can influence achievement. The parents play a major role in promoting and sustaining children's enthusiasm for reading. Regularly, children observe their parents and other individuals reading. Therefore "by observing their parents and others interacting with print, children learn that reading and writing have functional environmental uses" (Brown and Briggs, 1987, p. 278). The children easily ascertain the attitude that others have toward reading and the importance of reading in daily life. Therefore, "over a period of time, children gradually assimilate attitudes [toward reading] from the actions and beliefs of those with whom they regularly come in contact" (Briggs, 1987, p. 203). Children who develop positive attitudes toward the value of reading will approach reading instruction with a greater possibility for success.

Extensive research has been conducted on the teacher's influence in helping to foster children's attitudes toward reading. Schofield (1980) found that teachers who value reading tend to promote positive attitudes and higher

achievement among their students. Obviously, when learning to read, children are also developing attitudes toward reading and their own reading proficiency.

Children are also affected by the instructional behavior of their teachers. Allington (1980) discovered that teacher-pupil interaction was different for good and poor readers. He found that teachers are more likely to interrupt poor readers who err when reading aloud than good readers who err similarly. As a result, the actual instructional time allocated for reading tasks is much less for the poor readers.

In general, research (e.g., Kennedy and Halinski, 1978) has shown that good readers have a more positive attitude toward reading than poor readers. The poor attitude of disabled readers may have a negative effect on reading achievement. High interest in reading tends to be associated with high achievement, and low interest in reading tends to be associated with failure in reading.

## Summary

What are four characteristics of strategic readers? Strategic readers establish goals, select appropriate strategies, monitor comprehension, and display a positive attitude toward reading. Reading is a major academic skill that is introduced to children during the early school years. Therefore reading instruction should prepare students to interact in a meaningful manner with a variety of texts. Good readers focus their attention on the major ideas as they incorporate the metacognitive skills needed to accomplish the task of understanding text. Consequently, good readers are strategic readers who have developed the necessary skills to profit fully from the decoding process of reading.



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### .... Expanding Horizons ...

*This teaching idea is shared by Pat Vanderbilt, English teacher at Hudsonville Junior High School, Hudsonville, MI.*

My eighth grade class of academically advanced students studied Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in a modern translation. We learned about and discussed the historical setting of the tales, the purpose for the pilgrims' journey, and the identities of the vast variety of pilgrims. We read several of the tales and noticed that the pilgrims told their tales out of their own identities and interests.

After our reading was completed, I set up the following hypothetical situation:

*As a group we will go to Lansing to watch a basketball game in which Magic Johnson is going to be playing. The weather is favorable and we plan to hike on the back roads from Hudsonville to Lansing. We are going to camp along the way and in order to make the trip more fun, we will be telling stories along the way as well as around the campfire.*

We brainstormed possible topics, discussed a variety of formats and the style and length of the tales, and students were assigned to come to class on Monday prepared with written stories ready to relate to the group.

Monday arrived. I had slipped out between classes and had built a "campfire" in a vacant inner room, from crumpled red tissue paper piled over flashlights. We left our classroom, destination unknown to the students, walked down the hall and entered the darkened room to a whispered chorus of "Oooh, neat!" We read our various tales by the light of a flashlight which was passed around, and found that, as the pilgrims, we had many and diverse tales to tell.

The experience was worthwhile and enjoyable for us all. Each student had a chance to shine, and the class had an opportunity to transcend the "here and now" through their writing.

