

KS2 Comprehension Advice

The 2016 KS2 reading comprehension paper presented Year 6 children with a double challenge that may be summarised as: *deep comprehension of unfamiliar texts, read at high speed*. Of course, we all want our children to be able to read deeply and at pace, as these are crucial life skills. The reality, though, is that these skills take years to develop, but Year 6 teachers may have to help children achieve them in two terms!

Trying to tackle the speed *and* comprehension challenges *simultaneously* may actually hinder progress. (Imagine learning to unicycle and juggle simultaneously!) We suggest that separating them out – meticulously coaching children with comprehension strategies while working on speed-reading in *different* contexts / sessions – will enable real progress in the two areas. Then, when children start to experience confidence in each, you can merge them.

# **Teaching tips**

## Reading unfamiliar texts at speed

Effective **speed-reading** must be practised as frequently as possible; for example:

* Early work: first to find the answer to a question in a dense text
* Paired “duels” to a find a word that means the same as… (not just “find this word,” as this encourages reading without understanding)
* Gradual reduction in time permitted for pre-reading in preparation for guided discussion groups
* Make Humanities lessons reading-dominant, and select texts that are dense and challenging; in 3 minutes, which pair can find the most facts about (e.g.) rationing in WWII? If the material is really dense and unfamiliar, this will also build resilience / perseverance – vital for reading tests (and KS3!).

The **style of text** matters, even when the vocabulary is not especially challenging. Many children read contemporary books that have colloquial style (even in information texts) and we must *never* stop them from choosing these, but we *must* also ensure that they are spending time with more traditional material, so that the assessment texts do not appear off-puttingly alien.

* Make sure that the texts used *in all subjects* contrast with the colloquial style with which they are so familiar.
* Study older as well as recent poetry.
* Make sure children have *a teacher-directed book* to broaden their reading experience, alongside their freely chosen book.

## Deep comprehension

The great majority of the 2016 questions fell into just three of the “content domains” identified in the assessment framework:

1. Defining **vocabulary** in context
2. **Retrieval** of information
3. Making, explaining and justifying **inferences**

In the development of **vocabulary**, nothing beats reading – but children have to *read frequently for years* to develop the word-knowledge now required. This needs a whole-school focus…but helpful Year 6 strategies include:

Reading *to* children. Often the best strategy as you can read to children at a level higher than they’d read for themselves, exposing them to more-challenging words.

* In Year 6, read to the class daily, but use audio books, too (especially as a homework) always making sure that they are listening to stories more challenging than their own reading.
* Talk about new /challenging words wherever they arise; choose texts across the curriculum that will stretch the children’s vocabulary, and address these as an issue of comprehension whatever the curriculum area.
* Regularly run through the process of inferring the meaning of a new word from sentence grammar and content-context. Do this across the curriculum, not just in English lessons and guided reading. Ask:
  + “What could we replace it with?”
  + “What clues are there before and after?”
  + “Where might you have heard this before?”
* Have children follow this process independently, too. Children can find new words in any reading material and note down what they think they mean…and how they arrived at that meaning. No dictionaries here!

Many children make errors in literal **retrieval** questions, sometimes because of the question-structure, but also through careless reading!

* Never take for granted that children “get it”. Too much unpicking of words and sentences can sometimes lead to children missing the “whole”, so it’s usually better to start with “What’s it about?” and “What actually happened?” questions before going into the finer details.
* Practise recasting information, especially in cross-curricular lessons:
* *Use this paragraph to label this diagram*
* *Use this paragraph to complete this table*
* *Which of these artefacts is described in the text?*
* This last can be practised as a paired barrier game: which of the three objects is being described by your partner?
* Speed / skim-reading is dangerous to comprehension; see earlier points about separation until competence in each is achieved.

The making and explaining of **inferences** is notoriously hard, especially for infrequent readers.

* Model orally how you *know* something about a text that isn’t stated literally. (Never feel you are stating the obvious: evidence suggests you aren’t!)
* Similarly, have strong comprehenders explain their inferences aloud.
* Use a talking frame to support this process. It might be as simple as, “I know that \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ is feeling \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ because it says\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.”
* You may make inferences about the *author’s* intentions / feelings: “I know that Rowling wants us to dislike Draco because...”; “I know the journalist wants us to feel angry because she’s written...”