**Before reading**

* Help students tap into what they already know about the material.

It doesn't necessarily occur to students that their existing knowledge, experience, and preconceptions will have an impact on their reading. Before assigning them to begin a new book, chapter, or other text, give them a chance to review what they learned from previous assignments, write down any important questions or points of confusion related to the topic, and/or discuss any assumptions or opinions likely to influence their understanding of the material.

* Provide important background information.

For example, use vocabulary, specialized terminology, context, and content that students might not know, but which they'll need in order to make sense of the text.

* Preview the text.

Encourage students to glance through the material before they read it, in order to get a sense of the overall length, tone, and direction of the piece. Point out any headings, subheadings, and other information that might be useful, or have them discuss or write down predictions as to what the text is likely to say.

**During reading**

* Help students monitor their own comprehension.

Struggling readers often focus so intently on the mechanics of reading that they neglect to attend fully to the meaning of what they read. Some may even assume that it's more important to "get through" the text, so as to "complete" the assignment, than to understand it. And others may be unsure what to do when text becomes hard to follow. It might be obvious to skilled readers that they can stop and review paragraphs to make sure they understood them correctly, or re-read confusing passages, or look up an item in a dictionary or encyclopedia, or jot down questions as they go, but some students need to be taught such "fix-up" strategies.

* Teach students to take notes and draw visual representations of what they read.

It may not occur to students that they can read with a pen in their hand, making notes on paper or, when appropriate, on the text itself. A great deal of research has shown that the use of "graphic organizers" — any kind of outline, annotation, mapping out of the text, or other visual representation of what the text means, how it connects to other material, what questions it raises, and so on — tend to be particularly helpful in boosting comprehension.

**After reading**

* Teach students to summarize accurately.

Summarizing texts can help both to clear up any confusion about the meaning of a text and to secure it more firmly in students' memories. However, it can take a lot of practice to become adept at writing concise, accurate summaries that focus on main points and skip extraneous information. Teachers may want to provide samples for their students and model their own work, showing how they would identify key points, paraphrase them, and condense them. Further, they may want to assign students to start with relatively short, simple passages before going on to summarize longer and more complicated texts.

* Discuss the text.

Probably the most important comprehension strategy of all — but one that is surprisingly rare in the nation's secondary classrooms — is to give students frequent and extensive opportunities to discuss what they've read. As described in the [2008 IES report](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/3e/89/86.pdf) from the US Department of Education, it's neither easy nor straightforward to lead students in focused, informative, and engaging discussions of texts. Teachers need to come up with provocative questions, keep the conversation focused, guide it though lulls, and help students to learn and stick to important classroom norms and rules (having to do with turn-taking, respecting others' opinions, staying on point, and so on). However, when students do engage in high-quality text-based discussions, they tend to come away with much clearer and more nuanced understandings of course materials.

**An important warning**

* Strategies shouldn't replace content.

The bulk of the available evidence suggests that the explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies tends to be effective, helping students to better understand what they read. However, critics argue that strategy instruction is often taught in a wrongheaded and ineffective way. Rather than viewing strategies as tools to help students to understand the academic content they study, some schools treat them as if they were the content, to be learned for their own sake.

* Be careful not to put the cart before the horse.

Keep in mind that comprehension strategies, like other skills, are useful only to the extent that they help students to master the historical, scientific, mathematical, and other content that matters.