**Middle School Literacy: Improving Text Comprehension**

Intended for all teachers of middle school, including reading specialists and content-area teachers, this course is structured around strategies readers use before, during, and after reading to get meaning from text. It targets several research-based comprehension strategies that teachers can easily implement in their classroom. The course includes differentiated skill instruction for English-language learners and students with special learning needs.

### COURSE RESEARCH BASE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fluency</th>
<th>Vocabulary</th>
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<td>Fluent readers read as smoothly as they speak— with inflection, pace, and tone. In order to be truly fluent, a reader must comprehend and interpret text (Thurlow and van den Broek, 1997).</td>
<td>Struggling readers often have limited vocabularies because they have little exposure to books.</td>
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<td>Teachers use fluency norms as a basis of comparison when assessing students; classroom–ready booklists support fluency-building activities, and sample activities like modeled fluent reading and repeated readings provide further instruction and practice.</td>
<td>Master teacher modeling and classroom guidelines are available for previewing books to help plan instruction that fills in gaps in students’ vocabularies.</td>
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<td>Teach vocabulary that is related to what students are reading (Beck et al., 1982).</td>
<td>Teachers explore concept definition maps and coordinating lesson plans and prepare to use them with students.</td>
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<td>Give them many encounters with every new word (LaBarge and Samuels, 1974).</td>
<td>Small-group activities and oral exercises that expose students to new words, linked to other familiar words, are outlined.</td>
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<td>Students who are poor readers often have “heard of” a word, but they lack depth, breadth, or specificity in word knowledge (Beck and McKeown, 1991).</td>
<td>Experts demonstrate how two readers construct mental models from a text selection.</td>
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<td>Effective vocabulary study occurs daily and involves more than memorizing definitions. Teachers deliberately use new words as often as possible in classroom conversation (When Older Students Can’t Read).</td>
<td>Master teachers reveal appropriate words for instruction, and share a word knowledge chart as an in-class resource.</td>
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<td>Research shows that students encounter about 20,000 to 40,000 new words a year as they read (Anderson, 1996).</td>
<td>Teachers experience an interactive demonstration and activities on word building to teach students how to approach new words independently.</td>
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### Middle School Literacy: Improving Text Comprehension, cont’d

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<th>COURSE IMPLEMENTATION</th>
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<tr>
<td>• “Vocabulary knowledge is fundamental to reading comprehension; one cannot understand text without knowing what most of the words mean” (Nagy, 1988).</td>
<td>• Prompts for figuring out unfamiliar words give students an interactive way to see examples of semantic clues that rely on context to decode word meanings.</td>
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<td>• All students need a variety of skills and strategies to comprehend and construct meaning from their history, science, mathematics, technical, and literary texts.</td>
<td>• Motivating reading passages have students examine different strategies for comprehension and construct meaning from text.</td>
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<td>• You can help students explore genre and the literary elements mood and theme. When they understand these, they’ll read with greater comprehension and pleasure.</td>
<td>• Teachers receive direct online instruction about the literary elements mood and theme and are provided with lessons plans on each as well as extended genre definitions for both fiction and nonfiction.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Teaching the literary elements of character, plot, and setting will help students untangle the who, what, where, and why of fiction.</td>
<td>• Teachers receive direct online instruction about the literary elements character, plot, and setting, are provided with lessons plans on each, and learn how to use graphic organizers to enhance teaching of these literary elements.</td>
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<td>• Note that all small groups should be flexible; that is, groups should change as needed to reflect student performance.</td>
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<td>• When students share their responses to literature in small groups, they build their desire to become active, attentive readers. Social interactions are key to creating a community of learners who support, monitor, and enlighten each other (Vygotsky, 1978).</td>
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<td>• Children’s learning is boosted by active participation.</td>
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Middle School Literacy: Improving Text Comprehension, *cont’d*

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<td>• In all partner strategies the teacher matches each student to an appropriate partner (generally matching high-performing students with middle-performing, middle-performing with low-performing students) and provides the student with a specific role for the activity (<em>Engaged Literacy Learning</em>).</td>
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<td>• Social interactions are key to creating a community of learners who support, monitor, and enlighten each other (Vygotsky, 1978).</td>
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### COURSE IMPLEMENTATION

| • Classroom activities for building fluency through strategic pairing of students are highlighted, and complete booklists and activities are included. |
| • Classroom routines that support small-group student instruction are modeled and discussed. |

### Writing and Grammar

| • Writing improves when students practice answering specific question types, elaborating subjects and predicates, combining simple sentences, constructing clauses, and linking sentences into organized paragraphs (*When Older Students Can’t Read*). |
| • Writing provides an overt indicator of what students are thinking as well as helps students to focus their attentions on specific issues of importance (*Engaged Literacy Learning*). |

| • Think, pair, share, and specific note-taking tools that help students respond appropriately to text are illustrated; teachers learn about common grammar pitfalls and how to help students avoid them. |
| • Best practices for student note-taking and repeated journal language arts practices are fully investigated. |

### Age-Appropriate Materials

| • Before discussing any literary elements, it’s best to establish the genre of a given fiction selection. |
| • Literary elements such as character, plot, and setting are the ABC’s of fiction. Students need to understand these elements to comprehend and appreciate fiction. |

| • Interactive opportunities for effective teaching of literary genre include lesson plans, description charts, and prompts for making inferences; a teacher resource defining grade-appropriate literary genres is provided. |
| • Students will better understand fiction through the use of valuable lesson plan tools like character, plot, and setting maps and open-ended questions for lively class discussions. |

| • Simply appreciating literature is a goal in itself. To do that, students need to understand basic elements of fiction. |
| • Students complete a reading-interest survey; teachers are provided with a high-interest booklist. |
### COURSE RESEARCH BASE

**Age-Appropriate Materials, cont’d**

- When students apply the metacognitive process—awareness of what they’re thinking—to their reading, they can quickly use appropriate strategies to understand text.

- Middle school students read a good deal of nonfiction in their content-area textbooks.

- Students will need many more practice opportunities using easier texts, including previously read texts.

- Provide a wide range of reading materials. Mark the books or establish a coding system so students can find the appropriate level book.

### COURSE IMPLEMENTATION

- Master teachers model a Think Aloud on fix-up strategies that will help students clarify their understanding of a topic.

- Effective student methods to navigate a textbook incorporate activities such as textbook scavenger hunt and steps to reading graphics and other key textbook features.

- Meaningful techniques that match students with appropriate texts on their reading level create a high-motivation learning environment.

- Well-rounded classroom libraries are constructed by using informal student assessments such as the interest survey and questions about reading and reading histories.

### Motivation and Self-Esteem

- Stay positive and focus on what students can do. Set achievable goals and foster independence by giving students books they can read on their own.

- Struggling readers are rarely given speaking parts, a situation that reinforces their already low self-confidence (*Fluency Beyond the Primary Grades*).

- Students who believe in their own ability to comprehend and construct meaning from a text are far more likely to complete their assignments successfully (Schunk and Zimmerman, 1997).

- Guidelines for assessing fluency are provided so that teachers can obtain a baseline reading level for students to match them with appropriate texts.

- Experts demonstrate a variety of ways to motivate and excite a diverse-needs class with essential reading and language arts activities.

- Teachers are provided with classroom management scheduling tools that maximize instructional time with students who require extra student support.
Science-Based Reading Research

Middle School Literacy: Improving Text Comprehension, cont’d

References

On Reading


Whirry, M. Writing in Response to Reading. Scholastic Center for Literacy and Learning Paper, in press.


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On Professional Development
