CHAPTER 11

Helping Catch-Up Readers with Story Comprehension

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Catch-Up Readers vary in terms of the reading and literacy difficulties they exhibit as well as the causes of those difficulties. Comprehension is almost always a difficulty—after all, comprehension is the heart of reading. If a child has no comprehension difficulty, odds are good that few teachers or parents would be concerned about his/her progress.

Teachers can often identify underlying factors in a given child's comprehension problems. Sometimes the problems are embedded in the comprehension processes themselves. Perhaps the child simply does not understand appropriate strategies for gaining information from text and for recalling that information after reading. In many other cases, word-identification problems or poor vocabulary seem to be creating the comprehension deficits. In the case of poor vocabulary knowledge, the child may be experiencing a general deficit in world knowledge, due to a disadvantaged background, cultural differences, or cognitive limitation.

With those Catch-Up Readers for whom word-identification or vocabulary limitations function as the underlying factor in comprehension difficulties, teachers may be tempted to

address the impeding factors and let comprehension take care of itself. This would be a mistake. Comprehension of text gives meaning to reading and literacy efforts. If reading real stories that are meaningful to children becomes a mere by-product of a teacher's efforts, the heart is cut out of the reading program's purpose. In Pikulski's (1994) review of research on remedial programs, reading for meaning was the central focus of those programs deemed effective. Block et al. (2002) found that one important characteristic of excellence in teaching reading is the provision of a wide variety of reading materials "so that every student can find a specific book with which to fall in love" (p. 191).

In addition to providing meaning to the curriculum, comprehension activities based on salient, engaging material afford teachers many opportunities to develop Catch-Up Readers' word-identification abilities and vocabulary knowledge. These opportunities allow Catch-Up Readers to apply their newly learned skills in the context of authentic reading. When working with Catch-Up Readers on comprehension strategies, a considerable amount of time is spent developing word identification and vocabulary.

Teacher-directed comprehension activities are only one part of the overall holistic efforts of classroom, school, home, and community for dealing with the difficulties evidenced by the Catch-Up Reader. Encouragement of recreational reading at home is crucial, for example. Not surprisingly, Neuman and Celano (2001) found evidence that students from disadvantaged homes have far less access to printed materials than do students from middle and upper socioeconomic environments. A comprehensive program must include efforts to place books and other high-quality printed materials in the hands of all students. Bear in mind, however, that *access* involves more than simple availability. Worthy, Patterson, Salas, Prater, and Turner (2002) found that dramatic success in improving the amount of voluntary reading by struggling readers requires materials that are interesting to the individual students and that are on appropriate difficulty levels. Books purchased by parents and relatives often fail to meet this criteria.

The methods described in this chapter focus on how teachers can offer guidance and support of students as they engage them at higher levels of comprehension processing. Too often, instructing struggling readers in comprehension is limited to asking lower-level questions about their reading material—in short, to testing rather than teaching them. Instead, Catch-Up Readers should be actively engaged in (1) the meaningful endeavor of connecting story content to their own lives and knowledge, (2) making predictions based on the text, and in identifying structural elements of stories to improve recall (Scharer, Lehman, & Peters, 2001).

STORY RETELLINGS

A natural way to help students recall story content and draw inferences and conclusions about a story is to ask them to retell the story in their own words. Retellings play a dual role for the teacher who is working with Catch-Up Readers: (1) in an instructional mode, they promote comprehension, and (2) in a diagnostic mode, they reveal students' recall processes.

Story grammar (also called story structure) refers to the basic structure of stories that includes the setting, plot complications, and climax. Providing explicit instruction in the components of story grammar helps Catch-Up Readers develop the quality and quantity of their narrative comprehension (Gambrell & Chaser, 1991).

When working with students to improve their narrative recall, planning plays a key role.

Prior to instruction, the teacher should read the story and be familiar with its grammar—the major episodes, the characters, and the central theme. After the reading the story to the class or small group, students are asked to retell everything they can remember. Some Catch-Up Readers have limited unprompted recall of stories. In such cases the teacher should prepare several specific questions about the story to guide their recall. The teacher uses the story grammar that has previously been constructed as a guide to further questioning:

- "Tell me more about _____."
- "Why do you think that happened?"
- "What other characters are in the story?"
- "What overall message did you get from this story?"
- "Let's reread this part of the story. You listen and try to get a picture in your mind as I read."

During the retelling and the discussion, the teacher can analyze student performance in a variety of ways to provide immediate feedback and future guidance. The checklist in the appendix (Story Retelling—General Analysis Checklist) helps the teacher keep track of general story grammar elements and how well students use those elements in recall. For more detailed and specific assessments of student performance, teachers can create retelling checklists based on some of the stories read during instruction. The Sample Story Retelling—General Checklist and the Sample Story Retelling—Specific Checklist (both in the appendix) give examples of two such checklists.

DIRECTED READING–THINKING ACTIVITY (DR-TA)

Catch-Up Readers benefit from receiving strong guidance during reading. Such lessons are often called *teacher-directed,* but more recently the term *guided reading* has become popular. A guided reading lesson pattern—the "directed reading–thinking activity" (DR-TA)—was developed by Russell Stauffer (1975) as a more engaging alternative to the lesson plan pattern used in most basal series—the directed reading activity (DRA). Teacher questions in the traditional DRA focus on simple recall of story material. In the DR-TA, in contrast, students are taught how to understand information in the text by engaging in a series of predictions prior to reading specified segments.

Stories selected for DR-TA lessons should be highly interesting and the story lines should suggest several possible outcomes. In other words, the stories should lend themselves to the use of prediction questions. In a DR-TA lesson the students predict story events and then read or listen to part of the story to verify or discard the predictions. As the story unfolds, predictions become increasingly accurate as students have more and more information upon which to base their predictions.

Predicting what will happen in a story provides a purpose for reading. Experiencing a sense of purpose is especially important for Catch-Up Readers, because they often find it difficult to become interested in the outcome of the story. Additionally, the reader who makes a prediction and then reads purposefully to check the accuracy of the prediction is better able to use inferencing and other higher-level comprehension skills. Use of the DR-TA activity teaches students to become active, strategic readers.

The DR-TA lesson pattern follows four basic steps:

1. The teacher creates a readiness for reading in the students by telling them the title of the story and asking them to examine the pictures on the first page. Then the teacher asks the students to predict what will happen in the story. These first predictions are written on the chalkboard or on chart paper.

Bear in mind that accuracy of predictions is not the emphasis at this point. Rather, focus is placed on whether the predictions are reasonable, based on the information available.

2. The students read a predetermined section of the story silently (or aloud) to check their predictions. After this initial reading, they modify the earlier predictions in light of the information they have just gained. The students discuss what happened in the selection and why it happened. General discussion of the story content follows. Then the teacher asks the students to predict what will happen next in the story. Based on the information they now have, their predictions should begin moving from divergent to convergent, as they use information to make predictions that more closely match what will actually occur in the story.

This pattern of making predictions and checking them can continue until the story has been completed. The number of prediction–check cycles depends on the story and the needs of the students. Sometimes, especially with older students, teachers use this DR-TA format to get students started in reading a story, then allow them to finish the story independently.

3. After finishing the story, a general discussion ensues, in which the teacher poses questions such as: "Did you expect that to happen in this story? When did you figure out the ending? What was the best part about this story? Would you have done what _____ [the main character] did? How would you change the end of this story?"

4. Typically, skills teaching follows: vocabulary development, concept formation, specific comprehension activities, or study skills. The teacher should determine the specific skills that are needed by the group and include these in relevant text-based, contextualized activities.

Stauffer's DR-TA lesson pattern was originally designed as a whole class activity. Individualized DR-TAs can be a powerful teaching tool for Catch-Up Readers, however, with questioning and skills instruction designed to meet a specific child's needs. Although DR-TAs are usually used with narrative text, expository text that has sufficiently predictable elements can be used as well.

EXPERIENCE–TEXT RELATIONSHIP (ETR)

The "experience–text relationship" (ETR) instruction technique is a teacher-directed, guided reading activity closely related to the DR-TA. Developed by Au (1979) specifically for children from multicultural backgrounds, this technique can be used effectively with all students. The group teaching lesson pattern is based on two key principles:

1. The understanding that students' background experiences will help them understand what they read
2. The power of socially constructed knowledge

Prior to instruction the teacher reads the story, considers the relevant background experiences students are likely to have had, and develops several questions that will be included in the lesson to tap this background knowledge. Three steps follow:

- *The experience step*. At the beginning of the lesson, the teacher uses the previous prepared questions to elicit predictions from the children about what will happen in the story.
- *The text step*. The students read a section of the story to check the predictions. The story should be read in segments, so that new predictions and comprehension clarification can be included throughout the story.
- *The relationship step*. General discussion of the story follows completion of the reading. The relationship step connects the key ideas in the text to the students' experiences. A key goal in this step is to show students that they can use their background knowledge to help them interpret and understand stories. The teacher and children summarize the main relationships after the discussion is complete.

Au (1993) likens the ETR lesson to "talk story-like lessons," in which children talk among themselves to construct meaning. Lessons such as these are based more on collaborative conversation than recitation. The teacher's role includes providing a high comfort level and structuring participation so that students think about text at higher cognitive levels.

PROBABLE PASSAGES

The "Probable passages" instructional method was developed by Wood (1984) to teach reading through prediction, discussion, and writing. Prior to reading, several key words from the story are selected by the teacher. The words are presented to the students, who are directed to place the words within categories that are related to the elements of story grammar. After the words are placed in categories, the students are asked to create an "incomplete probable passage," by using the words they have categorized to form a story.

Next, students read the actual selection or listen to the reading by the teacher to check the accuracy of their original predictions. After reading, the students discuss what happened in the story and compare the author's version to their own predicted stories. Then they write a "revised probable passage" that tells what actually did occur in the story.

Wood (1984) developed this strategy to be used with stories from basal readers, but it can be used with almost any story. The one caveat: The story contents should not be readily evident from the title or the words the teacher selects for the probable passage.

There are four stages in this strategy: preparation, prereading, reading, and postreading. We have modified these stages to accommodate the needs of the Catch-Up Reader and have found that this modified strategy is an excellent way to help such readers comprehend stories and improve sight-word vocabulary.

The procedure is time consuming; each story takes about 5 days of work. However, the thoroughness of the strategy is beneficial to Catch-Up Readers because they have ample opportunity to learn new words, predict story content, determine actual story content, discuss story content, and write a summary of the story. As a result, Catch-Up Readers feel secure about their understanding of the story, their newly acquired reading vocabulary, and their writing skills by the time they have completed the final step.

Preparation

The teacher selects an appropriate story and chooses several key terms or words that will require extra study (see Figure 11.1). These words are placed in random order on the chalkboard,

overhead projector, or chart paper. If working in small groups, each group might receive a copy of the words and follow along with the teacher as he/she reads.

The teacher selects the story grammar elements that relate to the story. She then prepares an incomplete probable passage frame (see Figure 11.2) with these elements.

crocodile
zoo
barnyard
tree
hides
duck
scared
Mr. & Mrs. Sweetpea
flowers

FIGURE 11.1. *Probable passage word list (from* Crocodile in the Tree, *by R. Duvoisin, 1973).*

Prereading

The teacher reads the list of words to the students. They are asked to think about how they could group them within the incomplete probable passage frame. When first using this method, the teacher guides the group until they are comfortable categorizing the words independently.

For example, say the first word and ask students to predict in which category it fits. Discuss why a word or phrase might fit better in a certain category by questioning students about the story predictions they are making. Students also can add their own words, if needed, to construct their stories.

When working with Catch-Up Readers, ask them to write the words in the incomplete probable passages frame. (We recommend that two children share the writing and reading activities to enrich the social aspects of learning.) Writing the words provides a tactile and kinesthetic experience as they identify all the letters and their sequence, which enhances overall recall of the words. In this section of the lesson, the students take turns (1) discussing the categories in which each word should be placed, and (2) writing the words in the appropriate columns.

Next, the students discuss what could have happened in the story and then they create the incomplete probable passage (see Figure 11.3). The incomplete probable passage can be modified to fit the particular story, either prior to the lesson by the teacher or by the students during discussion. Teacher guidance is needed in this section to help the children fit their story into the patterned incomplete probable passage. Helpful questions include:

"How can we say that so it will fit this sentence stem?"
"Should we change the sentence stem?"
"How can we say that so it will make sense with the last few words?"

Catch-Up Readers should continue to work in pairs, each taking a turn sentence-by-sentence, with the teacher sitting with them or moving from group to group, facilitating the

Setting	Character(s)	Problem	Solution	Ending
barnyard zoo	Mr. & Mrs. Sweetpea	someone gets scared	tree hides	flowers

FIGURE 11.2. *Incomplete probable passage frame.*

The story takes place _____

_____

_____ is a character in the story who

_____.

After that, _____

_____

_____.

Next, _____

_____.

The problem is solved when _____

_____

_____.

The story ends _____

_____.

FIGURE 11.3. *Incomplete probable passage.*

students' efforts as they compose the probable passage. Keep the probable passage frame handy so that students can use it to copy words. Accept invented spellings for words that are not on the probable passage frame. Although this step is very time consuming, it fosters sight-word development and enhances students' sense of ownership regarding their predicted story. After completing the predicted story, the pairs of students take turns reading their sentences. They can reread their probable passage by choral reading, or each can take a turn reading the whole passage.

Reading

The students read the story to find out how the author told his/her story. The story can be read (by the students or teacher) up to the point of an action or event that provides the students with enough information to change their view of the story. It is important for some Catch-Up Readers to have an opportunity to change their predictions immediately, once incoming information provides them with a different schema. Catch-Up Readers should continue to work in pairs, with direct teacher guidance, if possible.

Postreading

The students discuss and compare their probable passage version of the story with the au-

The story takes place in a barnyard.

Crocodile is a character in the story who is hiding in a tree and meets a duck. After that, he makes friends with all the farm animals and they hide him in the barn. Next, Mrs. Sweetpea sees him and is scared. The problem is solved when the crocodile brings Mrs. Sweetpea flowers every morning. The story ends with the crocodile living on a farm and helping Mrs. Sweetpea in her flower garden.

FIGURE 11.4. *Completed probable passage.*

thor's version. They create another probable passage with the information gained from reading or listening to the selection (see Figure 11.4). Discussion and comparison of the predicted story with the actual story is conducted with the teacher and the pairs of Catch-Up Readers. Sometimes it is a good idea for different pairs to present their probable passages to the whole group. In fact, small group discussion is best followed up by the students within the large group sharing their stories.

In addition, Catch-up Readers are often asked to draw a picture of their favorite part of the story. Although the writing and copying aspects of this lesson plan are often slow and tedious for Catch-Up Readers, the results are well worth the time and effort. Students are proud of their stories; they have committed several words to sight memory; they are active participants in writing a story when presented with several words; and they are active comprehenders.

STORY MAPPING

"Story mapping" is another comprehension strategy that uses the elements of story grammar to help students understand the plot events, the role of characters, and the theme of a story. Story mapping provides readers with a set of questions which they use to organize the

major parts of the story. Story mapping helps students develop a general sense of story structure, and it enhances readers' comprehension of particular stories.

This procedure requires that the teacher review the story to be read and list its essential story grammar elements (see Figure 11.5). In creating this map, the teacher should consider major events, both explicit and implicit, and major links between the events.

A more structured story map based on story grammar can be created from the worksheet presented in Figure 11.6. The teacher develops questions based on the story grammar elements and creates the map with the students by asking questions and helping them formulate their answers to fill in the worksheet and then create the map.

Research supports the use of story mapping with students who have not developed an implicit understanding of story grammar, and with poor readers. If a Catch-Up Reader has difficulty recalling story elements and their sequence, the use of story maps is highly recommended as long as the teacher assists the students with the activity in a meaningful way and does not use it as a busy-work assignment.

STORY FRAMES

The concept of "story frames" was developed by Fowler (1982). Although similar in purpose to Story Maps, story frames offer a more comprehensive analysis of certain aspects of a particular story so that students' attention can remain on one aspect until it has been fully developed. Fowler suggested five types of story frames (1) story summary with one character, (2) an important idea or plot, (3) setting, (4) character analysis, and (5) character comparison.

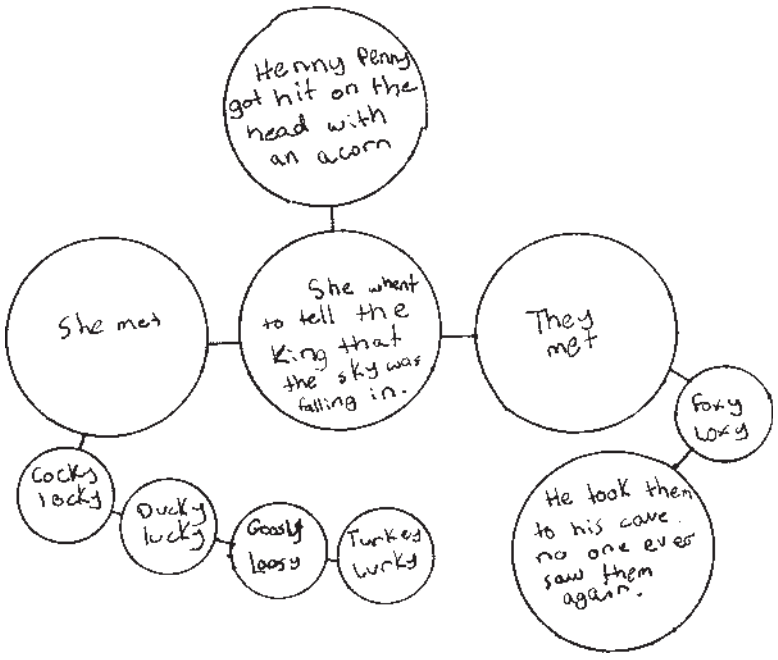

FIGURE 11.5. *Story map of "Henny Penny."*

Title:	"The O'Learys and Friends"
Setting:	The roof of the O'Learys house and their yard.
Characters:	Susan the cat, the O'Learys, Susan the lady, neighbors
The Problem:	Susan the cat can't get down from the roof of the O'Learys' house. The neighbors come by to offer suggestions for getting the cat off the roof.
The Goal:	To get the cat off the roof and keep her safe from harm.
Event 1:	The O'Learys have moved to a new house. The children want to make friends. They see their cat on the roof and try to get her down. The neighbor, Susan, comes over to help.
Event 2:	Susan the neighbor brings milk for the cat. Mr. O'Leary puts a chair and a mop outside the window.
Event 3:	Other neighbors come to help. Lots of cats come to drink the milk. The neighbor goes on the roof.
Event 4:	The cat isn't on the roof. She is in the backyard drinking milk.
Event 5:	Mama gets lemonade for everyone. The O'Learys have friends. The other neighbors get to know each other.
Resolution:	Susan the cat is off the roof. The O'Learys know their neighbors.

FIGURE 11.6. *Story map worksheet of* The O'Learys and Friends *(Berg, 1961).*

Story frames provide structure for readers by presenting an organized way of responding to the components of specific stories.

Fowler suggested using the following steps when constructing story frames.

Part A: Teacher's Preparation

1. Read the story and identify the aspect on which you want to focus (e.g., concepts, plot, or facts).
2. Sketch out a paragraph that addresses the type of information on which you want to focus.
3. Take the completed paragraph and delete all words, phrases, and sentences except those needed to maintain the purpose of the paragraph. Do not remove too much information, especially when first introducing the concept of story frames.
4. For later lessons, try your frame with other stories that are similar to the one for which the frame was intended. Modify the frame so that it can be used flexibly in different situations. Figure 11.7 provides examples of story frames.

Character Story Frame #1

This story is about a _____ named _____.
_____ tried to _____.
The story ends when _____.

Plot Story Frame

The problems start when _____. After that, _____.
Next, _____. Next, _____.
The problem is solved when _____.

Setting Story Frame

The story takes place in _____. The time setting of the story is _____. I know this because the story shows _____. Other clues that show when and where the story takes place are _____.

Character Story Frame #2

_____ is an important character. _____ is important because _____. One time she or he _____. Another time, she or he _____. I think that _____ is _____ because _____.

Character Comparison Story Frame

_____ and _____ are two characters in the story. _____ is _____.
_____ is _____. For example,
_____ tries to _____ and
_____ tries to _____.

FIGURE 11.7. *Examples of story frames.*

Part B: Instruction

1. The teacher and students read the story or content selection.
2. The teacher presents the story frame.
3. The teacher and students discuss possible responses to the first sentence of the story frame, then consider subsequent lines and discuss possible responses. The teacher directs students to determine if the information being added to the story frame is related to the pre-

vious information and if it makes sense. Discussion continues as teacher and students move back and forth in the story frame to make as many connections as possible.

4. The teacher rereads the completed sections of the story frame to the students at each stage, so that they can hear and use prior information.

5. After direct teaching and modeling has been conducted, students can begin to fill out story frames independently. For Catch-Up Readers, directed teaching may be needed for a number of lessons before the students can do the task alone.

SEMANTIC WEBBING

"Semantic webbing" is a useful tool for (1) recalling or thinking through events in a story, (2) helping Catch-Up Readers develop specific purposes for reading, (3) tapping into their existing schemas for the story, and (4) tapping into their background information. It is most useful for stories about familiar topics or themes. The steps are as follows:

1. One important aspect of the story is identified by the teacher and written on the chalkboard or the overhead projector. It is usually written in the form of a question and placed within a circle. Figure 11.8 provides an example of the results of a class discussion in which students were predicting upcoming events in a story.

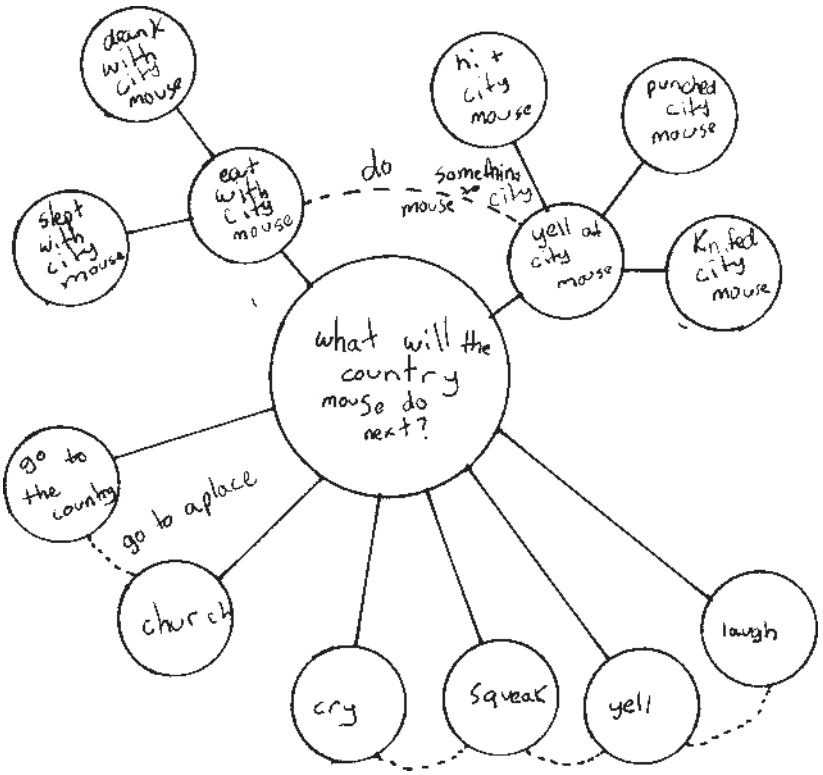

FIGURE 11.8. *Semantic web for* The Country Mouse and the City Mouse *(Fisher, 1994).*

2. Students' hypotheses in answer to the question are written in circles as web strands around the question and dotted lines are used to connect strands related to each other. Supportive or elaborative hypotheses are placed in circles connected to the inner ring of circles.

This procedure can be repeated for major events throughout the story or for individual chapters in a book.

STORY PREVIEWS

A "story preview" is a summarizing statement about the content of the story to be read. It can be read by the teacher to the students or read by the students themselves. The story preview provides readers with background knowledge for the story, identifies key ideas, and shows how these ideas are related. It usually ends with a question that intrigues students and draws them into reading the story. Many basal readers include a story preview in the teacher's manual.

An example follows.

> Brad Cameron lived in New York City with his big brother Jake and his dad. His mom had died two years ago after a long illness. Life changed for all the Camerons when Mom died. Dad couldn't hold down a job anymore, and Jake got in with a bad gang in the neighborhood. Nobody had time for Brad.
>
> One day Brad came home from school to find that his whole life was about to change. There was Uncle John sitting on the steps outside their tenement house. Uncle John was there to take Brad on a wild adventure to Africa. Brad's heart pounded when he thought of leaving his home to go far away, but he didn't know how hard his heart would pound when he and Uncle John had to fight for their lives.

SUMMARY

Comprehension is the heart of reading, and it is almost always a difficulty for Catch-Up Readers. If the underlying factors involve word recognition or vocabulary, attention to those aspects of literacy is crucial, as discussed in Chapters 9 and 10. The student will also need support for comprehension in classroom reading, using methods such as those presented here.

When the teacher observes and assesses a Catch-Up Reader's presenting problem to be comprehension, methods such as those in this chapter focus on teacher guidance and support of student engagement in narrative text: Retellings, experience–text relationships, probable passages, story mapping, story frames, semantic webbing, and story previews.

Chapter 12 extends the emphasis on comprehension in the present chapter to deal with comprehension in the content areas. It focuses on reading of expository text in such topics as science and social studies.