Comprehension—understanding a text's full meaning and relevance—is the ultimate aim of reading. Comprehension is often difficult to teach directly, however, because it encompasses so much and relies on so many different skills. Still, one theme reflected in this chapter is the importance of testing the assumption that when students cannot answer questions that test an understanding of a text's full meaning and relevance, the problem is that they don't grasp the broader concepts those questions directly address. In fact, many times students cannot answer deeper questions not because they don't know how to think in a broad or abstract manner but because they failed to understand what they read fully and are trying to make cognitive leaps from a faulty base of underlying knowledge.

Champion teachers, I have observed, do ask rigorous and challenging questions to assess students' knowledge of a text's full meaning and relevance, but they also put intensive focus on often unacknowledged barriers to comprehension. Word- and phrase-level questions are a prime example. Failure to understand colloquial expressions and phrases or the syntax of a complex sentence (who, for example, a certain pronoun refers back to) is common among students who arrive in class with underdeveloped language skills. Therefore asking questions like "Who's 'he' in that sentence?" or "What does the author mean when she writes that Harry 'flashed his teeth,' and what does that tell you about him?" are effective questions not just for ensuring solid comprehension of basic facts in a passage but because they are necessary to higher-level
comprehension. In a key scene in C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, for example, Aslan, the heroic lion, “turns on” the witch. A reader who fails to understand that to “turn on” someone means to do more than to turn around but to do so with the intent to attack will miss the building tension in the scene and fail to understand it. I am not arguing for an exclusive focus on word- and phrase-level questions but for the recognition that such questions are as necessary to understanding gaps in student comprehension as broader and deeper questions that appear to better assess their knowledge of the big picture.

In a nutshell, the assumption that’s broken down by watching champion teachers in action is the idea that instruction that teaches comprehension skills should necessarily look like instruction that relies on those skills once established. This challenge is exacerbated by the fact that so many of us became acclimated to teaching that relies on established comprehension skills in college (and often high school). Its look and feel have been normalized for us and literature classes have replaced reading classes in our minds’ eye. As a result, many teachers skip over steps like confirming understanding of key phrases and events in a text in order to get to “deeper” conversations about a book’s place in the world on the assumption that the latter discussions are more rigorous. However, this is not necessarily true, as classrooms that build strong comprehension skills rather than using them to engage in interpretation maintain higher standards for the use of evidence to support opinions, for example.

**TECHNIQUES FOR BUILDING COMPREHENSION**

I’ve described some of the key methods champion teachers use and adapt to teach comprehension following. I’ve grouped them into three categories according to when in the reading process they take place: before, during, or after reading.

**Prereading Techniques**

Top reading teachers often begin the reading process by preteaching students critical facts and context they’ll need to understand in order to make sense of the text they’re about to read. If students don’t really know what a Nazi is when
they start reading, they’re not going to get what they need to out of *Number the Stars* or *Diary of Anne Frank*. Preteaching background material is usually more efficient than stopping and providing explanation and detail during reading because it prevents misunderstandings before they crop up rather than remediating them afterward. Although the argument for preteaching seems self-evident, the manner in which top teachers approach it is distinct from what’s often “typical,” and informed by a greater emphasis on efficiency and intentionality.

For example, when I was first teaching, we were socialized, as many teachers are today, to coax contextual information out of students with KWL charts. We would list in two columns (1) things students said they already knew and (2) things they said they wanted to learn. The “Things I Know” column, I came to realize, asked students to make unsubstantiated guesses about the things they knew least about or led to our developing a wide-ranging list of “facts” of varying degrees of importance and accuracy. The “Want to Know” column was similarly grounded in lack of knowledge—often idiosyncratic or distracting from the things that were most important for students to master and many of which would never be addressed, causing me to play a shell game of pretending to be open to talking about whatever my students wanted when this was illogical and impossible. I found with some relief, then, that observation of top teachers suggested the power of delivering the necessary preliminary information in a direct, clear, and organized manner at the outset and saving the earnest list of what I want to understand for during and after the reading. Ten minutes of teacher-driven background and then getting right to reading is usually worth an hour of, “Who can tell me what Nazis were?” Efficiency matters.

The tricky part lies so much in the background knowledge you know your students will lack but the knowledge they lack that you may not realize. We’ve probably all experienced a version of this. We sweep a text for tricky vocabulary words before reading it with a class, for example, only to find on teaching it that a word we missed (once, twice, even several times during planning) is an obvious barrier to comprehension. In retrospect we ask: How could I have failed to see that? And of course the same thing happens with other forms of important prior knowledge. We don’t always recognize the places where our students’ gaps exist. You know they won’t know what a Nazi was but don’t realize that they know almost nothing about World War II, or the proximity and relative size of Denmark and Germany, or that Danes and Germans don’t speak the same language.

What follows are some ways to ensure that prereading sets the most powerful basis for knowledge possible.
**Contexting**  The most basic approach to helping students comprehend a text is to give them context on it—to take them methodically through key information that will help them enter into it as informed readers, for example, what they need to know about history or science or baseball or Japan to follow the action. Contexting can take place before the introduction of a text or before reading a specific section, a chapter, say, as Lisa Delfavero of Rochester Prep recently did in preparing her fifth-graders to read one of the key scenes in Gary Paulsen’s novel *Hatchet.* Lisa led off by showing her students three or four slides of a moose with full antlers. “I don’t want to give too much away but it will be important for you to understand how fierce and intimidating a moose can be,” she said. She wisely recognized that her students, many of whom had never left Rochester, would need that context to understand the key scene (a standoff with a moose) and accomplished the task in less than thirty seconds.

Top teachers strive for efficiency in their contexting, delivering the information directly and letting the experience of the book yield the deeper engagement. At the same time they are aggressive about finding and addressing areas where contexting might work. As E. D. Hirsch has pointed out, lack of prior knowledge is one of the key barriers to comprehension for at-risk students and it affects all aspects of reading, even fluency and decoding, as struggling with gaps soaks up the brain’s processing capacity. “Prior knowledge about the topic speeds up basic comprehension and leaves working memory free to make connections between the new material and previously learned information, to draw inferences, and to ponder implications. A big difference between an expert and a novice reader—indeed between an expert and a novice in any field—is the ability to take in basic features very fast, thereby leaving the mind free to concentrate on important features” (“Reading Comprehension Requires Knowledge of Words and the World,” *America Educator,* Spring 2003, p. 13).

**Focal Points**  Reading a rich text is like visiting a state fair or perhaps a circus, with action in every direction and full of sensory detail, voices, events, and images—maybe too many, in fact, for a reader to attend to them all. By college or even the latter years of high school, many of us find this to be the exciting part of interpretation, with each reader uncovering a unique version of events or focusing on different events in arriving at a different meaning.

Many teachers therefore model their classes on approaches to meaning similar to the ones they enjoyed so much in college. However, this aspect of reading often poses a challenge to developing readers. You learn to determine what’s worthy of attention only with time and practice. Without years of practice, readers often
make questionable or nonstrategic decisions about what to attend to. They notice something of tangential relevance but miss the crucial moment. The trapeze artists are in full swing, and they can’t stop looking at the cotton candy seller. They see three details but fail to connect them to one another.

To help students manage the complexity of a text, champion teachers steer them in advance toward key ideas, concepts, and themes to look for. Which characters will turn out to be most important? What idea will be most relevant to the story discussion? In addition, they advise students what’s secondary, not that important, or can be ignored for now. “There’s a lot of discussion of their clothing. That would have told us a lot about them in the eighteenth century, but we’re not going worry too much about it.”

In a lesson I observed, a teacher read the short story “The Substitute” by David Labar with her fifth graders. The story’s ending is both unexpected and requires a significant inference to understand. As and even before she read, the teacher began calling students’ attention to key lines and details that would help them understand the end when it arrived: “The word conductivity is going to be very important to understanding what happens in the story, so let’s define it carefully now.” “Ooh, that line is extra-important. Let’s underline it. The fact that he was picked on by his students is going to prove very important in the end.” By the time her students arrived at the finale, they didn’t know what the surprise would be, but they had paid special attention to the key pieces of evidence and were fully prepared to make the inference that comprehending the story required.

In a lesson in his third grade classroom at Excellence Charter School of Bedford Stuyvesant, Rob de Leon set his students up for their study of Akimbo and the Elephants with an elegant introduction that used focal points on several levels. First Rob told his students to get ready to be surprised by the book. “One of the things you’ll find about great books as you read them all your life is that they change your thinking,” he told them. “This book is going to change your thinking about elephants, about poachers, and about the idea of bravery.” Then to accentuate not only a theme like bravery but also their own change of opinions, he asked them to write answers to a few quick prereading questions that forced them to state their opinions about issues raised in the book (e.g., “True or false: it is acceptable to take any paying job to feed your family, even if it hurts animals”) so they could track their own changing perceptions as they read.

Front-loading In addition to introducing key ideas in advance of students reading them, the best teachers introduce key scenes before their students read them, much like movie studios make sure their multimillion-dollar bets pay off by
prescreens for us in the form of previews, a series of exciting, fascinating, mysterious, or otherwise intriguing scenes from the movie. The scenes they show aren’t always in narrative order. They are often quick and disconnected, designed to excite our interest and awaken suspense rather than offer a logical précis of the story to come. They front-load our exposure to critical scenes so we feel connected to the story before we begin and so we give special attention to those scenes when we come across them. We’ve been tipped off that they are especially dramatic and important. For a reading teacher front-loading scenes can also excite interest and increase comprehension by making the narrative seem more familiar at key points. When you encounter a scene you’ve seen previewed in the midst of the movie and feel as if you’ve seen it before or recognize that it is of primary importance, further meaning is unlocked in some of the same ways that seeing a movie or reading a text for the second or third time does.

As with a movie preview you don’t necessarily need to front-load in the same order scenes will appear in the book or even with full explanation; a little mystery can help too. You goal is for your student, reading Macbeth for the first time, to encounter the scene where Macbeth tries to wash the blood he imagines on his hands and say, “Oh, here it is! My teacher told me about this scene!” and read it with special attention.

Here are a few examples of front-loading and focal points:

- “You’re going to meet just about the cleverest and nastiest crocodile you’ve ever seen. Not only is he surly and mean, but wait to you see him try to disguise himself as a palm tree!”

- “For the rest of your life, you’ll hear people refer to the idea of having ‘blood on your hands,’ and they’ll mean not literal blood but the inescapable weight of guilt. That expression, that idea, was coined by Shakespeare four hundred years ago in this play. So when you see Macbeth talking about the blood on his hands, you’ll know that you’re reading a scene people have found unforgettable for centuries.”

- “There’s a big storm coming in this chapter. And the children are going to be scared. But watch and see how Sarah reacts. It’s one of the moments that shows her character, so it’s very important.”

**Prereading Summary** Summarizing occurs before, after, and during reading. I’ve included it here because it is especially effective as a jumping-off point
for any given day’s reading to summarize the previous day’s. If you’re using your summary to quickly prepare students to read a new section of the text, try combining questioning and narrative in a fast-paced summary. Start summarizing the reading yourself to cover key sections quickly. Stop at critical points and ask students highly focused questions to fill in the blanks: “So the two heroes fight a bloody battle. And where do they fight it, Janice? And who wins the battle, Paul? And what happens to the loser, Steven?” Obviously these questions are not as rigorous or as in-depth as summary questions you might ask after reading, but their purpose is different: to activate memory of prior reading.

The narrative portions of these summaries are often especially effective when they are quasi-dramatized in an energetic play-by-play that captures the thrill and energy of the original text by describing it in a tone that reflects the mood of the events, that is, modeling excitement when summarizing sections when characters were excited and modeling anger when characters were angry.

**Prereading in Action** When reading teacher Dinah Shepherd at Roxbury Prep in Boston prepared her students to encounter *Animal Farm* by reading an article on the Russian Revolution, she talked students through a basic understanding of industrialization and communism (*contexting*). They talked briefly about how the initial idealism of communist revolutions was quickly co-opted. Shepherd directed her students to pay particular attention to the characteristics of Trotsky, Lenin, and Stalin since they would be portrayed, in allegory, in *Animal Farm* (*focal points*). As she did this, she dropped in intriguing references to scenes from the book: “When you see the pigs walking around talking... when you see the horse flipping her mane with blue ribbons in her hair... , you’ll know this is no ordinary farm. That’s how you know this story is an allegory” (*pre-screening*). When her students began reading the novel, they did so with a keen sense of carefully honed anticipation.

**During-Reading Techniques**

Although an intentional approach to instruction before reading is critical to success, the types of questions you ask while students are reading are of critical importance. It’s easy to assume that this importance should always mean asking broad and abstract questions. Although such questions are important, champion teachers are diligent in maintaining a balanced approach to their questions.

**Don’t Wait** Among the most potent facts about top teachers is that they constantly check for understanding by asking students questions to see if they “get
it” frequently and throughout the passages they read. They read a few sentences or perhaps a few paragraphs and pause to ask a quick question or two, assessing whether students are following the narrative and guarding against unexpected barriers to comprehension. Their questions are often relatively straightforward. Did students absorb a key detail, make a key inference, understand a word? In asking they are careful to keep discussion limited. The goal in their questions is in fact not to discuss but to confirm understanding so students with additional thoughts are often asked to save them until a clearer discussion point.

Perhaps this sounds obvious, but watch enough instruction and you will frequently see teachers slog through a passage of several pages, holding their questions for the end and never stopping to confirm that students are still with them. An ancillary benefit of Don’t Wait, by the way, is the fact that in allowing you to recognize comprehension gaps as soon as they emerge, it allows you to gather better data about the root causes of your students’ comprehension difficulties. If you waited until the end of a passage, you’d likely never know the source of the problem. What’s more, catching a misunderstanding is more effective as soon as it happens, in this case as soon as the sentence is misunderstood rather than several minutes later or even at the end of a paragraph and after three subsequent sentences of misunderstanding have accrued. Asking questions every few sentences rather than waiting until the end of a selection accomplishes this task, with the caveat that it is extremely important to recognize that frequent breaks for questions can interrupt the flow of the narrative, making it fragmented and interfering with comprehension if they are not extremely brief. It’s critical to return to the reading quickly.

To use this technique effectively, combine the frequency of questions with brevity. Ask quickly to ensure comprehension and attention, and then get right back to reading. While you read, lots of short, focused discussion breaks maximize comprehension in the moment. This isn’t to say that there’s no place for broader and deeper conversations. They are merely different from what you ask to ensure that students grasp the full detail and depth of what they’re reading as they are reading it.

Here’s an example of what Don’t Wait might look like during a reading of a short section from the first chapter of Madeline L’Engle’s A Wrinkle in Time. The example is adapted from watching the lessons of several top teachers. I’ve inserted the teacher’s questions in roman type within the text of the book, which I am assuming students would be reading aloud. If you’re not familiar with A Wrinkle in Time, the passage occurs just after the protagonist, Meg Murry, has
come down from her bedroom in a state of anxiety and fear in the middle of a dark and stormy night. She finds her little brother, Charles Wallace, waiting there.

In the kitchen a light was already on, and Charles Wallace was sitting at the table drinking milk and eating bread and jam. He looked very small and vulnerable sitting there alone in the big old-fashioned kitchen, a blond little boy in faded blue Dr. Denton’s, his feet swinging a good six inches above the floor.

“Hi,” he said cheerfully. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

Teacher: Is Meg’s brother younger or older than she is? What does it tell you about him that he says he’s been “waiting for her”?

From under the table where he was lying at Charles Wallace’s feet, hoping for a crumb or two, Fortinbras raised his slender dark head in greeting to Meg and his tail thumped against the floor. Fortinbras had arrived on their doorstep, a half-grown puppy, scrawny and abandoned, one winter night. He was, Meg’s father had decided, part Llewellyn setter and part greyhound, and he had a slender, dark beauty that was all his own.

“When didn’t you come up to the attic?” Meg asked her brother, speaking as though he were at least her own age. “I’ve been scared stiff.”

“Too windy up in that attic of yours,” the little boy said. “I knew you’d be down. I put some milk on the stove for you. It ought to be hot by now.”

Teacher: Who’s calmer right now, Meg or her little brother?

How did Charles Wallace always know about her? How could he always tell? He never knew—or seemed to care—what Dennys or Sandy were thinking. It was his mother’s mind, and Meg’s, that he probed with a frightening accuracy.

Teacher: Who is “he” in that sentence? [After correct identification of Charles Wallace as “he”:] What does it mean that Charles Wallace probed their minds with frightening accuracy?

Was it because people were a little afraid of him that they whispered about the Murr’s youngest child, who was rumored to be not quite bright?

“I’ve heard that clever people often have subnormal children,” Meg had once overheard. “The two boys seem to be nice, regular children, but that unattractive girl and the baby boy certainly aren’t all there.”

Teacher: What do people mean when they say Meg and Charles “aren’t all there”? Are they “subnormal”?

One question you might ask, after reviewing the preceding sequence, is how do I balance Don’t Wait with other methods of developing reading skills from previous chapters, such as Fluency or Control the Game? Although this sequence could be integrated with such approaches as is, it could also be coordinated via two separate readings. That is, you might have students read once for fluency and then read a second time with questions embedded.
Lower the Level  Questions about a text can refer to any of (at least) four levels of meaning:

- Word or phrase level of meaning: “What does the word forlorn mean here? Why might the author have chosen that word?” “The author says, ‘It was the worst thing imaginable.’ What’s the ‘it’ she’s referring to there?” “What does it mean that Aslan ‘turned on’ the witch? What else beyond just turning around?”
- Sentence level of meaning: “Can you take that sentence and put it in simpler language?” “How might we express an idea like that today?”
- Passage level of meaning: “What part of this paragraph tells you that Mohi is mean spirited?”
- Story level of meaning: “What’s the purpose of this essay?”

It’s easy to assume that the goal is to get to the story level as quickly as possible and ask as great a proportion of story-level questions as possible. In fact, the lower levels of meaning (word and sentence) are critical to ensuring firm story-level understanding. Misunderstandings about big issues often start as misunderstandings about smaller things: who “them” is in a sentence, for example. Students will be more successful in story-level discussions when they have a firm grasp of sentence and word-level meaning. Remember to ask constantly about the lower levels and ensure that meaning is built reliably up from small units to larger ones.

Here are the questions from the Wrinkle in Time transcript I included in Don’t Wait with each identified according to the level it focuses on. To be clear, I would expect the teacher to ask more story and passage level questions after concluding the passage but only on the assumption that they are balanced by plenty of word-phrase and sentence-level questions during (and even after) the reading.

Is Meg’s brother younger or older than she is? [Passage level]

What does it tell you about him that he says he’s been “waiting for her”? [Phrase level]

Who’s calmer right now, Meg or her little brother? [Passage level]

Who is “he” in that sentence? [Word level]
What does it mean that Charles Wallace probed their minds with frightening accuracy? [Phrase level]

What do people mean when they say Meg and Charles “aren’t all there”? [Phrase level]

Are Meg and Charles Wallace “subnormal”? [Passage level]

**Evidence-Based Questioning** Top reading teachers constantly emphasize groundedness in the text, even on subjective and opinion questions, by asking evidence-based questions—that is, questions where students must make reference to a fact or event from the text. One of the primary advantages is that evidence-based questions are “testable” in that you can much more clearly tell whether students have understood (or done) the reading. It’s easier to get a line on how well (and even whether) a student grasped what she just read if a question pins her down to something concrete in the text. You can fake your response to a question about a story’s theme by listening to the discussion and offering a vague summary in support. You can offer a judgment (“What did you think was the most exciting scene, Sarah?”) with only the thinnest engagement in what you’ve read. But you can’t nearly as easily fake “What happened on page 157?” “What words in the sentences tell you there’s trouble brewing?” “Find me the sentence that proves who took Carlton’s watch.”

It’s important to observe that evidence-based questions need not be narrow or concrete. You could just as easily ask students to find a sentence or a passage that supports the argument that a certain idea is the theme of a story. Further, evidence can be used in two ways: to induce and deduce. You could ask students to find three pieces of evidence that characters in Greek mythology are punished for doing things to excess or you could cite three examples of characters getting punished for their excess and ask student to draw the relevant conclusion.

To provide some examples, I’ve taken some of the questions from the *A Wrinkle in Time* sequence in the sections above and revised them to show how they might be made more evidence based.

*Original:* Is Meg’s brother younger or older than she is?

*Revised:* Who can read me a sentence from the text that shows that Meg’s brother is younger than she is? Who can find me more evidence, this time with an example that helps us guess his age.

*Original:* What does it tell you about him that he says he’s been “waiting for her”?
Revised: Who can find other examples of places where Charles Wallace appears to know what Meg is thinking?

Original: Who’s calmer right now, Meg or her little brother?

Revised: What details in this scene help show us that Charles Wallace is cooler and calmer than his sister? I’ll want you to find the exact words.

Original: What does it mean that Charles Wallace probed their minds with frightening accuracy?

Revised: On the next page we’re going to see Mrs. Whatsit read Meg’s mind. What can you conclude about their relationship from these two strange incidents?

Postreading Techniques

A good experience with a text doesn’t end when the reading ends. Here are some observations about the types of questions champion teachers ask as they push discussion onto broader or more analytical topics after completing a text (or a day’s reading).

Summarize Summarizing is especially important as a tool to process at the end of a session of reading and is most effective when it forces students to prioritize information separating important from peripheral points and rephrasing and condensing key ideas to ensure that they “own” the material. When summarizing is unsuccessful it’s often because a teacher fails to stress the difference between retelling (rewriting or restating details) and summarizing (retelling while condensing and prioritizing the important parts). When teaching students to summarize, ask questions like, “Who can describe the chapter by recapping its three most important events?” or “Can you summarize the author’s two major arguments in support of his thesis?” These questions are powerful because they ask students to prioritize information. Until students fully understand the nuances of effective summary, asking questions requiring specific elements of summary such as prioritization are often most effective as teaching tools.

Another particularly effective strategy is to provide students with an ever-decreasing word limit for their summaries (for example, “Summarize this chapter in fifty words. Now summarize the chapter in a single sentence with fewer than fifteen words”). This always proves challenging; shortening accurately and effectively is a lot harder than just shortening because it requires true comprehension and insight to prioritize information. There are, as far as I can tell, two ways to
shorten a summary: reduce the number of topics you are trying to include and reduce the number of words you use to describe the topics you include. These tips may help get students closer to efficient and effective summaries:

- Ask students to go back through their initial summary and eliminate every word that's not absolutely necessary. As students get more proficient at this skill, suggest that they eliminate adjectives and replace them with stronger, more potent verbs, boiling "ran as quick as she could" down to "sprinted." You can take this a step further by then suggesting words for them to eliminate (and expanding their conception of how to drop verbiage) or having them suggest unnecessary verbiage in one another's summaries.

- Ask students to prioritize the events in a summarized section. They will get only so far in making tighter and tighter descriptions of all the events in a section but will ultimately have to choose to leave some out entirely. Rank-ordering the events or material to be summarized forces that process along. (Discussing that order can be an effective conversation as well.) Jackie Robinson once said that a life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives. You can use the same criterion for deciding which events belong in a summary: "An event is most important in the impact it has [or is likely to have] on other scenes in the story. If you know or think it will affect the outcome of the book, include it in the summary; if not, drop it."

**BETTER CONNECTIONS**

When asking students to make connections beyond a text, champion teachers recognize that certain types of questions are usually more rigorous (and more likely to reinforce reading comprehension) than others. The types of questions are listed next in priority order according to their relative rigor, with the more rigorous question formats at the top (be aware that this order may be contrary to what many teachers expect or assume):

- **Text-to-text.** These are preferable to text-to-world and text-to-self because they reinforce testable ideas rather than judgments, opinions, and stories that students may not be able to access ("That happened once to my mom!"). They can include within-the-text questions ("When else in the book have we seen someone act this way?") and across-text questions ("Can anyone think of a character in another book we've read who was similar?" or "How is the suspense in this chapter like or unlike the suspense at the end of *Fantastic Mr. Fox?*").
• **Text-to-world.** Asking students to relate an issue in a story to some event or person in their world is a valid exercise. This is so especially when it asks students to connect specific aspects of a text to specific aspects of the broader world rather than allowing them to discuss any connection they see to any event in the world.

Some of the most common text-to-world connections are text-to-media connections in which students connect something in the text with television shows or movies they have seen. Text-to-media connections can often take conversations about texts off track. It may be best to tell students that you are not looking for text-to-media connections. However, assuming a student’s text-to-media connection is a valid one, the best follow-up question is something like this: “How does the connection you are making between our hero in the text and Spider Man help you to understand the text?” or “What specifically about Mr. Fox is similar to Spider Man?”

• **Text-to-self.** These questions are inevitable and valid, but they are also more limited in their relevance to other students and comprehension of texts. Although engaging, they can often lead classes astray. They are best when they focus on the specific elements of the text being read (“How would you feel if you were in a position like Donovan, Charles?”) rather than sweeping in their breadth (“Did anyone else have a time when they felt scared?”).

Keep in mind that connections are not an end in and of themselves. For example, while reading a story about a birthday party, a student may say, “I went to my cousin’s birthday party last week.” It is important not to accept this connection without further questioning: “What happened at your cousin’s birthday party that reminds you of this story?” or “What kinds of things happened at your cousin’s birthday party that might also happen here?” Students should be encouraged to use their connection to develop an understanding of the text, and to do that, you should bring the connection back to the text: “So how does that help us understand what’s happening here?”

Teaching literary structures and conventions is especially productive in helping students make worthy connections. The basic idea is that conventions describe the ways stories usually or often work: the degree to which a story conforms to or diverges from convention (what most stories do) is a deeply productive line for connecting. But to do so, students need lots of study of other texts and the idea of structures and conventions. Point out that they can and should look for connections to text, particularly text-to-text connections and connections based
on structures, conventions, and methods. Ensuring a rich collection of shared books that the whole class or school has read is one good way to enable this.

STANDARD-ALIGNED QUESTIONS

Most state standards articulate a dozen or so core types of questions students need to be able to answer. If they don’t do so explicitly, the assessment portfolio your school uses (state tests, SATs, and whatever additional assessments you add) do it implicitly. For example, New York essentially asks four types of character study questions: character change (“How did x change during the story?”), character perspective (“Which of these statements would x probably agree with?”), character motivation (Why did x decide to walk home from school?”), and character traits (x could best be described as . . .”).

Although it’s easy for teachers to fall into the habit of asking the same three or four types of questions over and over, their students need to practice the full array of question types, both to ensure their success on assessments that stand between them and college (and college readiness) and to make sure they are comfortable demonstrating a wide range of skills. Discipline yourself to ask questions that mirror the kinds of comprehension questions students need to master, thus providing practice at all skills and enforcing diversity on you and your students. Top teachers are intentional about this in several ways, often making an inclusive list and mapping them into their unit plans so they are constantly focusing on a different type of questions. They also study the different formats of questions used on assessments to better understand how the questions are asked and ensure that their own questions are at least as rigorous as the questions that control access to college.

SEE IT IN ACTION: CLIP 25

VOCABULARY AND COMPREHENSION

In clip 25 on the DVD, Roberto de Leon of Excellence Charter School of Bedford Stuyvesant demonstrates exemplary teaching of vocabulary and comprehension. He is preteaching vocabulary words that are critical to the story. Notice that students get multiple opportunities to use and hear decoy
in a variety of settings, including one that intentionally front-loads the story they are about to read, thus allowing them to apply their vocabulary to explain and react to the book. De León is careful to differentiate between words that are the same and words that are similar. Contrasting the subtle differences between words is at least as important as discussing their similarities.

READING STRATEGIES AND THE TECHNIQUES OF CHAMPION TEACHERS

In the Introduction to this book, I discussed the difference between techniques and strategies. I recognize in drawing this distinction that many teachers of reading use what they refer to as “reading strategies” to guide their teaching. These strategies draw from the work of several authors who propose similar conceptualizations of the strategies students need to achieve full comprehension. They usually include a group of skills like the following: noticing, connecting, picturing, wondering, predicting, inferencing, and summarizing.

Given the prominence of strategies-based instruction in the professional discourse of reading teachers, I’ll describe how the techniques here can overlap and interface with common approaches to “reading strategies.” Although a variety of authors write about reading strategies, I will use Nancy Boyle’s book, Constructing Meaning Through Kid-Friendly Comprehension Strategy Instruction (2004), for this discussion because it is among the clearest and most effective.

In the analysis here, I am frankly critical of some aspects of strategies instruction and the manner in which it can be employed. Therefore I want to make it clear that I believe that well-implemented, strategies-based reading instruction can be effective and that the work of authors like Boyle has advanced the quality of the teaching of reading. At the same time, a series of significant pitfalls can erode its effectiveness, and a wide disparity exists in effectiveness among the strategies. With that in mind, I make some general observations about strategies and then look at each of the most common strategies individually.

Risks and Challenges of Strategies Instruction

Relying heavily on reading strategies poses risks and challenges. One challenge is that the “strategies” involved are often too broadly defined. The strategy
the words and the basic fact of the description, they will picture it naturally. That, Boyles appears to assume, is what their minds naturally do. In that case, teaching them to read fluently and attend carefully to mundane details might be more effective than investing time in intentionally “teaching” them to picture, something they appear to know how to do. They just need a clear sense of what to picture.

In a similar example, Boyles writes:

“Readers figure out different kinds of things as they read,” I tell my students, holding up the “figuring out” mini-poster.... “For example, the author might write that a certain character calls people names and teases kids who are younger, and this character picks fights, too. The author wants us to figure out that this kid is a . . . How would you fill in that blank?” I ask my students.

“Bully!” everyone choruses. “He’s a bully.” [p. 12]

The fact that Boyles assumes that her students already have the capacity to figure out a story before she’s taught them strategies (as long as the basic narrative is presented to them as simple, clear formulation) suggests that the problem may not be in their capacity to figure out but in their capacity to understand enough of the details of the story to engage their “figuring-out” skills fully. In short, good readers may “figure out,” but the problem for bad readers may not be that they don’t know how to figure out but rather that they don’t understand what they’ve read enough to use those skills.

Another challenge to strategies instruction, a challenge to which the techniques in this book are not immune, is that the easier a strategy is to understand and use, the more likely teachers may be to use it. However, something easier to use is not necessarily more conducive to student achievement. Connecting, picturing, and predicting are especially tangible and specific. Their clarity may tacitly encourage teachers to use them more often. This may not be justified, however, because they have significant downsides, which are discussed later in this section, particularly in regards to “picturing,” a technique easily overused and therefore particularly distracting.

In addition, reading strategies can be used to promote both engagement and comprehension, which are different goals, and teachers sometimes do not recognize the difference between the two. Boyles writes, “If we try really hard to think of ways a story connects to us and our lives . . . we’re more likely to stick with the story. That’s one reason it’s so important to look for connections. Making connections with the text will help us to keep reading it” (p. 7). Although it’s certainly worthwhile to try to engage students in texts so they want to read them, it’s also important to note that making students want to read a book and ensuring
that they comprehend it are different issues. Picturing what they’re reading may engage students and cause them to persist in reading, but this is a different issue from whether they understand what they are reading. For all you know, the picture they’ve made in their minds is erroneous! Strategies-based instruction can frequently fail to make this distinction.

Finally, there is a large caveat regarding fluency that generally does not get fully acknowledged in discussions of strategies instruction. Boyles writes, “Teaching reading comprehension strategies can benefit just about any student operating at a reasonable level of reading fluency (second grade or above)” (p. xiv). It’s worth noting that many students in high-poverty schools aren’t at that level, and Boyles’s assertion that a second-grade level of fluency is the cut-off point for determining the efficacy of strategies instruction appears to be arbitrary. What if it’s fifth grade? What if it’s “sufficient to the level of the book you’re trying to read” and the book is hard? With any technique, the question we should ask is not whether its use can help students learn to read but whether it can help students learn to read better and more efficiently than reading. Whether this is the case with strategies instruction remains an unanswered question. It is almost assuredly the case in some instances and assuredly not the case in others.

The unintended consequence of any teaching approach is the tendency to make the approach (not comprehension) the purpose. For example, a student makes a useful comment, but the teacher says: “You’re not visualizing! I asked you to visualize.” This risk is especially acute in strategies-based instruction because the strategies are actions students are supposed to enact, and this public aspect means there’s an incentive to misapply the approach more aggressively and broadly.

This is equally true with the techniques in this book. Ben Marcovitz, principal of the successful Sci Academy Charter School in New Orleans, described how to think about this paradox in a panel presentation: “My teachers are accountable for results. The techniques can get them there. They have for others. But the point is to succeed—not to use the techniques no matter what. If they can find some other way to get great results, I don’t have a problem with that.”

**SPECIFIC STRATEGIES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO THE TECHNIQUES IN THIS BOOK**

In this section, I discuss each of several common reading strategies and analyze both areas of concern and their connection to the techniques described in this book.
Noticing

In further describing the strategy of noticing, Boyles writes, “When we find clues in the text, we should file them away carefully in our mind so we can pull them out later and see how they all fit together—as main ideas and themes” (p. 11).

While noticing things is critical to becoming an effective reader, it is far too broadly and vaguely defined to be useful as a tool for teaching. What comment, observation, or moment of engaged attention would not be an example of noticing something about a text? Since every response to a book requires an act of noticing something, teachers risk reinforcing that any observation is worthwhile or that all observations are equally productive. Or they risk telling students to notice without giving them useful guidance on what to notice. The question is: What are the things students should notice most, and how can they systematically be identified and modeled?

One place where the techniques I’ve described in this section can be especially useful is in helping students to notice better. What kind of observations can students make to use their noticing in the most productive way?

- Observations that relate to and advance understanding of the most important ideas in what you are reading. This sounds obvious but can be greatly improved with a bit of discipline and advanced planning. Use focal points, for example, to draw students’ attention to some critical themes or ideas in what you’re reading and ask them to try to notice, as they are reading, the things that make Macbeth’s ambition destroy him or that allow Charlotte’s goodness to change and Wilbur to mature. In short, don’t just have students read; have them read for something. Alternatively, and especially if you prefer a style that’s less prescriptive about what the most important themes might be, use front-loading to draw students’ attention to scenes of special importance so that you can discuss critical watershed moments in special depth.

- Observations that relate to and advance understanding of skills (that is, learning standards) you’re teaching at the time. Using standards-aligned questioning is especially effective to develop students’ skills at noticing a wide variety of powerful things about a text. If you are studying characterization, for example, ask them to notice how the characters are changing, or are described, or speak. Many students are most inclined to notice in the ways that are most natural and intuitive for them. Asking them to employ specific skills in noticing forces them out of their comfort zones and builds their ability to notice in a wider variety of ways.
- Evidence-based observations. Noticing the evidence that supports the opinion is as important as the opinion itself, or even more important, “What makes you mistrust him?” is usually a better question than, “Do you trust the main character?” Use evidence-based questioning to stress this aspect of noticing.

- Observations drawing on different levels of noticing. The thing about not noticing is secondary ignorance. By its definition, you don’t usually know that you didn’t notice something. A lower-level technique can cause students to notice more systematically by stressing and causing them to practice different types of things to notice about a text. Observing what a tricky phrase means or how an author cleverly crafted a sentence to make the subject of the action unclear is often just as important as noticing that the main character is probably untrustworthy. Certainly students need to practice noticing at all of these levels. Ask them; then try to notice things about the colloquial phrases an author uses; her word choice; or how she likes to start or finish her chapters; or, ideally, how her word choice and use of phrases show that she’s trying to do something particular with the beginning of chapters.

**Connecting**

When connecting (or making connections) students are socialized to think of ways the text they are reading is similar to some previous or familiar experience. Readers can connect with another text (a text-to-text connection), the world (a text-to-world connection), or themselves (a text-to-self connection). One of the benefits Boyles describes of connecting is that it engages students in the text. “If we try really hard to think of ways a story connects to us and our lives... we’re more likely to stick with the story” (p. 7). This is certainly true and significant, though it’s also worth observing that while getting students to engage is an important and worthy goal, it is a different goal from their comprehending.

Thoughtful connections can often be the jumping-off place for inferences about the text. They can help students begin to understand the text by tapping into what they already know about a topic. Effective connections can also help students see the story from a character’s point of view by accessing their own analogous experience. But they don’t necessarily do this, and in many

*Thoughtful connections can often be the jumping-off place for inferences about the text. They can help students begin to understand the text by tapping into what they already know about a topic.*
cases, the connections students are most likely to make ("Hey, this is just like something that happened to my family!") are least rigorous and least useful to engendering long-term reading comprehension. ("Hey, this is just like the introduction to the other book we read," is probably a more useful connection in the long term than is a text-to-self connection.) Furthermore, students (or teachers) can infer that the point is simply to make any kind of connection to the text. That shouldn't be the end. Connections aren't inherently valuable; only good connections are. A good connection serves to help readers understand something about the text, not the thing connected to—in most cases, having the discipline to use the world to understand the text rather than the text to understand the world. Students can also potentially let their connection project onto the text. That is, they can replace actual details with imagined details or contradictory or confusing details as when a student who once lost an article of clothing and was upset about it infers that a character who lost her sweater was also upset, even while the text has clues showing that the character was happy about it. Finally, connections can be off task and waste time, and clever students can use them to co-opt discussion onto easier or more convenient topics.

It may also be that people naturally make connections, and so the skill doesn't need to be taught so much as managed and guided. The skill is in making connections effective and focused. In light of that, you should be clear about linking connections back to the text to understand what light the connection sheds on what you're reading.

These and other aspects of making effective connections are discussed in the Better Connections section above.

**Picturing**

In picturing, Boyles writes, students are taught to use clues from the text to create an image of what is described. This helps students remember what they've read and engage in the text. "The pictures we have in our mind help us respond to the text at an emotional level" (p. 8), Boyles writes, and this is almost certainly true.

Generally, however, picturing is among the most overused and poorly used strategies, and this is significant because it can be among the most destructive in its application. The use of picturing as a comprehension strategy may be confused by some teachers as validating visual literacy generally and make it more common for them to use visual images more frequently to aid in comprehension. This may seem benign, but the result is a compensatory strategy for effective reading. In
teaching students to picture, some teachers feel encouraged to draw on actual pictures to make inferences about the story in a way that crowds out reading. When a teacher says, “What do you think is about to happen? Look at the picture if you need help!” she is allowing students to “read” the story by drawing enough information from pictures to keep them from having to read the words to succeed. This results in their learning to circumvent their poor reading skills.

Teachers may also overuse the picturing strategy because it is so accessible. As a result, they may spend valuable time visualizing rather than reading or asking more productive and rigorous questions. Teachers often make it a point to take a simple passage from a book and ask students to visualize it so they understand it. “He went to his desk, opened the drawer and pulled out a marker.” Class let’s try to visualize what that looked like. What was in the drawer? How did he walk across the room?” This can be useful. But it’s also worth noting that this could be a scene where the author didn’t think it was important to create a sensory image. More important, picturing can be incorrect. Students who are asked to picture an image can and often do introduce erroneous details. In this example, the student might create a false image of when and why the character went to the drawer and what he found there.

Finally, it’s also possible that intentionally visualizing doesn’t help students learn to comprehend what they read that much. As Boyles points out in her book, people seem to naturally visualize when they understand something, so we could ask whether picturing is a strategy the causes comprehension or is the result of it, with better picturing resulting from better comprehension.

The most productive applications of visualizing I’ve seen teachers use are to ask students to draw or picture a scene in order to clear up what’s confusing about it. For example, a teacher I observed teaching Macbeth drew separate pictures of Birnam Wood and Dunsinane and then sketched how soldiers cut down the branches and marched to the latter location, thus proving the impossible prophecy of Macbeth’s dream true. This is different from asking students to share what they are visualizing. Another effective use of visualizing is to ask students to create a picture using details they have read in the book. This is actually a version of an evidence-based question, and when teachers do it well,
they ask students to point out specific aspects of the story and or where they found certain details that gave them their picture.

**Wondering**

In wondering, students ask questions of the text as they read. Examples, Boyles writes, might include wondering “what might happen next in the story or how the story might end” (p. 9). This technique is also sometimes called “asking questions.” As with noticing, however, the technique is at times vague. Wonder about what? Anything? All things equally? Having students develop questions about what they are reading encourages them to be active readers and may motivate them to know more about a text. Moreover, wonderment and curiosity are usually very good things. The point is that there are myriad forms of wondering, and they aren’t all inherently of equal value. Students’ private experience, in which what they want to wonder about is their own to determine, and public experience, in which a group of people chooses certain wonderings to discuss, are different kettles of fish. There are settings for both, and in the latter, a class deserves criteria about what wonderings they’ll engage most. “Here are the kinds of things we’re going to talk and wonder about today to increase our understanding of the story [or our skills at understanding stories].” I realize this may seem either vague or directive (Is he telling us to shut down kids’ imaginations? some readers may ask), but encouraging students to wonder on the premise that it is inherently among the most valuable things they could be doing regardless of how and what they wonder about is a false premise.

Wondering can be especially effective when modeled by a teacher, especially in a soliloquy form. “I’m wondering, here, what might make Donald want to give his dog away. I’m thinking back to the earlier chapters, and I know Donald loves his dog. The author told us he would ‘never do anything to hurt him.’ So I’m wondering: Why might a boy give away a dog he loves?” While this strategy of making thoughts visible can model how to think about books effectively, it can also result in teachers’ doing most of the work. Rather than involving students and working to transfer thinking skills to students, they are merely performing a public literary analysis.

**Predicting**

Boyles writes that “predicting sets the stage for students to monitor their own understanding of the text” (p. 10). In its most basic and common form, it involves teachers asking students what they think is going to happen next. Its benefits include engagement. It gets students to focus on what they are reading next to
see if their prediction is confirmed. When done well, it can also help them monitor their understanding of the text based on whether their predictions came true. That’s the best possible outcome of predicting, but to make that effective, you should make a habit of circling back to intentionally discuss whether predictions came true and why. This last step makes predicting a relatively productive activity, but unfortunately, the last step often doesn’t happen, perhaps because many teachers don’t recognize the particular value of this aspect of predicting. You can augment the strength of your predicting if you use the evidence-based questioning technique. This will cause you to consistently ask more productive questions. In the immediate follow-up to each prediction, you can ask: “Why do you think will happen next?” and “What in the text makes that seem likely to happen?” In the postprediction follow-up you can ask: “Why did you think so?” “What fooled you?” and “What made you know this would happen?”

Two other challenges pose barriers to predicting and can often make it an ineffective use of time. First, students can make wild predictions unrelated to the text or more related to their lives or experiences than to the text. Alternatively they can narrate the obvious and make predicting facile. The best defense against this is once again to focus on evidence-based questioning. This forces students to ground their predictions in the text.

**Figuring Out and Inferring**

The last strategy common to most reading teachers is alternatively called figuring out or inferring. Boyles refers to figuring out as pushing students to go “beyond the construction of basic meaning to a deeper understanding of the text” (p. 12). This strategy attempts to focus on what is by all rights the heavy hitter of comprehension: understanding what’s between the lines, left unsaid, hinted at. In short, this is the strategy that asks students to go beyond the basic, literal understanding of the text to apply higher-order thinking. But its importance belies the difficulty of applying it. Obviously, merely asking a student to make an inference won’t do. You can’t tell a student, “Read this page and figure something out that you can share with the class.” Inference happens but can’t be commanded.

To make inference successful you must set the table, often by meticulous work with both the Lower Your Level and Don’t Wait techniques. When your
students are learning to make inferences, you can surreptitiously assemble the key pieces they need to make their leap forward by stopping frequently with short discussions of and directives to attend to the key pieces of guidance in the pages or lines before. Stop and ask a student to reread a line, unpack a key phrase, define a word, underline a crucial piece of evidence. Focus on words and phrases; the building blocks that make or break the inference often start at the mundane level. Ironically, strong instruction on the literal meaning of the text, including vocabulary and focus on important details, doesn’t distract from higher-order thinking. It makes it possible.

**Summarizing**

Advocates of strategies-based instruction sometimes also include summarizing as a key strategy. For this strategy I see nearly 100 percent overlap with the techniques in this book. For a further discussion, see *100 Percent* (technique 36 in Chapter Six).