



Unlocking Meaning: Helping Students Comprehend Better

by LORI OCZKUS

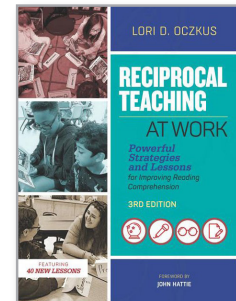
Strong reading comprehension is the key to being a good reader. Teaching students to utilize a “toolbox” of strategies to unlock meaning increases comprehension, promotes equity and access to books, and fosters reading enjoyment.



LITERACY CHAMPION: LORI OCZKUS

Lori Oczkus is a literacy consultant, author, and popular speaker across the United States and internationally. Hundreds of thousands of educators have attended her motivating, fast paced workshops and read her practical, research-based professional books. Lori has extensive experience as a bilingual elementary teacher, intervention specialist, and staff developer. She teaches in classrooms in

virtual and in person settings and knows the challenges teachers face in teaching students to read today! Lori has been inducted in the *California Reading Association Hall of Fame* for her many contributions to the field of reading in California and internationally. Lori is the author of eight bestselling books on literacy including the internationally acclaimed *Reciprocal Teaching at Work: Powerful Strategies and Lessons for Improving Comprehension* (foreword by John Hattie, ASCD/ILA, 2018). Learn more about Lori Oczkus on her website, www.lorioczkus.com.



One to Know: Developing Strong Comprehension

The goal of reading is to comprehend or understand what we read. Simply decoding, or reading the words isn't enough if the reader cannot make sense of the text. Some students may struggle with reading comprehension. In today's fast paced digital culture, students are bombarded with print and online texts that require close reading and critical thinking. Even before the impact of the pandemic, an alarming number of students were already reading below the proficient level on national tests; 65 % of fourth graders and 66% of 8th graders. (NAEP, 2019). Teachers and parents alike often express concerns with student reading comprehension and engagement. When students struggle with understanding they often lose motivation and interest in reading for pleasure as well.

Do any of these challenges with comprehension sound familiar? Students may:

- decode the text but not recall what they've read.
- read below grade level.
- not show interest or engagement in the reading material.
- lack strategies for figuring out challenging vocabulary words.
- experience difficulty identifying main ideas and details to summarize.
- not enjoy reading on their own.

Reading research suggests the urgent need for educators to teach comprehension strategies at all grade levels from very young children to adolescents (Pearson & Duke, 2002). Reading experts agree that students benefit from learning to use a toolkit of “good reader” strategies to help them comprehend better. A proven set of reading strategies that mirror what strong readers do is called reciprocal teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1986) or the “Fab Four” (Oczkus, 2018). Reciprocal teaching includes rotating through the following four strategies during reading: **predicting** what the reading material will be about, **clarifying** challenging vocabulary, **asking questions**, and **summarizing** the text. As a total “package” the four strategies work together to help the reader build meaning. When used consistently, at least twice a week, reciprocal teaching yields up to .74- or two-years growth in just one year! (Hattie, 2008). This simple and engaging discussion technique offers educators and parents alike, a natural process for taking turns talking about a text while deepening understanding. Reading for understanding not only improves student comprehension but also motivation to read!

What to Do

What does a “Fab Four” or reciprocal teaching discussion look like in the classroom or at home? The student along with the teacher or parent takes turns sharing their ideas for each of the strategies. It is a give and take discussion, not an interrogation or quiz! Think of it as an engaging “My Turn, Your Turn” chat about reading. In the classroom students take turns sharing their ideas with the teacher and classmates. The stronger adult or peer readers become models for the students who struggle.

Classroom Examples

Primary Grades: Read Aloud With a Picture Book

The teacher pauses throughout the reading to model then invites students to partner/respond for each of the strategies. To make lessons more engaging for young children we often use puppets and props with the characters *Paula Predictor*, *Clara Questioner*, *Quincy Questioner*, and *Sammy Summarizer* (Oczkus, 2018).

Intermediate Grades: Chapter Book

Students take on roles in teams of predictor, questioner, clarifier, and summarizer as they read and discuss the text together. The teacher continues to model as necessary. Students may use sticky notes to mark discussion points in the text. Each team may fill in a graphic organizer together to summarize the reading.

Secondary Students: Informational Article

Students read an article and annotate with the Fab Four. They work in teams to discuss the reading using the Fab Four as a guide. Teacher models as necessary. Students may take on roles during the session or flow naturally between the strategies. Students pose higher level questions about the reading for peers to debate and discuss.

Fab Four Discussion Guide for Home or School

The following is a Fab Four discussion guide to use at school or home with any grade level and any text including picture books, chapter books, content area reading, fiction, informational text, or poetry. Take turns with students sharing examples of each strategy.

Predict

Good readers use text evidence along with their prior knowledge to make logical predictions throughout reading. Predicting is not random “guessing”. It involves paying close attention to the author’s purpose, text clues, and the structure of the text.

How to Predict: *Look over the title, illustrations, graphs, and skim some of the text. Share your ideas.*

What is this about? What do we predict will happen next? What will we learn on this next page, chapter, part? I think this is about _____ because _____.

Clarify

Good readers pause on tricky words to figure them out rather than skipping them. Strong readers also consider multiple ways to clarify vocabulary including sounding out, using word parts such as prefixes and suffixes, rereading, reading on, and thinking of synonyms, or words that mean the same.

How to Clarify: *Choose challenging words and share ways to figure them out. Even if you know all the words, choose the trickiest one and tell how you could teach it to someone else!*

A tricky word is _____ so I figured it out by _____.

Question

Good readers ask questions before, during, and after reading to stay engaged with the text.

Poor readers often are so lost they are unable to formulate good questions. Questioning is an important and integral part of reciprocal teaching. Students and the teacher take turns asking questions.

How to Question: *Teach students different types of question prompts and stems such as “game show questions”, questions that start with “I wonder..” and open-ended thinking questions such as “Why do you think?” Or “How do you think?” Who, what, where, when, why, how or I wonder...”?*

Summarize

When students practice summarizing their overall reading improves. Summarizing is a whopper of a strategy that involves the orchestration of several important skills including recalling important events and details, sequencing, paraphrasing, and rereading.

How to Summarize: *Pause frequently throughout reading to practice summarizing with partners and in teams.*

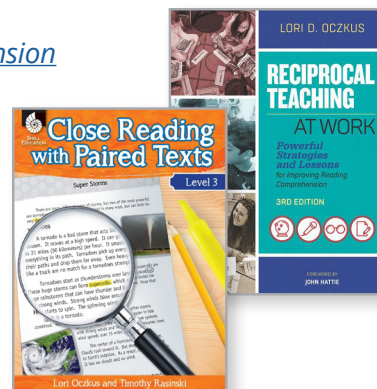
Use prompts and graphic organizers such as first, next, then, and finally to guide student summaries. Invite students to use drama and sketching to act out summaries in pairs or teams.

This was about _____. I learned _____.

More to Know and Do

For practical ideas and lessons that dramatically improve student reading comprehension and motivation see the following books, programs, and free resources authored by Lori Oczkus.

- Lori's best-selling book and video [*Reciprocal Teaching at Work: Powerful Strategies and Lessons for Improving Reading Comprehension*](#) (3rd ed foreword by John Hattie, 2018 ASCD/ILA)
- [*Close Reading with Paired Text*](#) by Lori Oczkus and Tim Rasinski, PH.D. (Shell, 2015) K–12 series for ready to use Fab Four lessons using pairs of short informational texts and fiction such as poetry and reader's theatre.
- Lori's [*puppet kit*](#) for younger grades features the characters in the book *Paula Predictor, Quincy Questioner, Clara Clarifier, and Sammy Summarizer*.



Lori's Links to FREE Fab Four Resources!

- [Article International Literacy Association Blog](#)
- FREE PODCAST [Reciprocal Teaching: Improving Reading Comprehension with Four Powerful Tools](#)

How to Reach Lori Oczkus

Lori Oczkus is available for in person or virtual professional development presentations, webinars, keynotes, and literacy coaching on a wide variety of literacy topics including her specialties- comprehension and reciprocal teaching and scaffolding with guided writing.

Lori can be reached at loczkus52@earthlink.net. Also, please visit Lori's [website](#) for access to her many books, articles, and resources. Follow her on [Twitter](#).