

## Improving Adolescent Literacy – English Language Arts

This infographic is based on the recommendations of the What Works Clearinghouse Practice Guide *Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices*. It presents strategies that classroom teachers and specialists can use to increase the reading ability of adolescent students. The four recommendations from the practice guide included in this infographic aim to help students gain more from their reading tasks and improve their motivation for and engagement in the learning process. Activities are also included to demonstrate how the recommendations may be integrated into classroom instruction.

Click on an image below for details.



**1. Provide explicit vocabulary instruction.**



**2. Provide direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction.**



**3. Provide opportunities for extended discussion of text meaning and interpretation.**



**4. Increase student motivation and engagement in literacy learning.**

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### 1. Provide explicit vocabulary instruction

It is important for English language arts teachers and other content area teachers to provide explicit vocabulary instruction in their classes. Content area texts oftentimes include specialized vocabulary, jargon, and discipline-related concepts that students may not encounter anywhere else. Learning content area vocabulary is important so students can fully grasp the concepts and ideas of a particular subject area. When students receive explicit vocabulary instruction, they learn the meaning of new words and strengthen their ability to construct meaning from text independently.

Direct vocabulary instruction includes helping students look up definitions using online resources, read the words and their definitions, match words and their definitions, participate in oral recitation, memorize definitions, and use graphic displays of the relationships among words and concepts such as semantic maps. Strategies to promote independent vocabulary acquisition skills include analyzing semantic, syntactic, or context clues to derive the meaning of words by using prior knowledge and the context in which the word is presented. Research shows that both approaches can effectively promote students' vocabulary (Kamil et al., 2008).

#### How to carry out the recommendation



1. Dedicate a portion of regular classroom lessons to explicit vocabulary instruction.



2. Use repeated exposure to new words in multiple oral and written contexts and allow sufficient practice sessions.



3. Give sufficient opportunities to use new vocabulary in a variety of contexts through activities such as discussion, writing, and extended reading.



4. Provide students with strategies to make them independent vocabulary learners.



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### Vocabulary Activity – Linear Array

A linear array is a graphic organizer that helps students visualize gradations of meaning between two related words. Linear arrays can be used to provide students with exposure to words in a variety of contexts.

In the activity below, teachers would instruct students to work in small groups to arrange the words in boxes on a line between the words “risk” and “safety.” The boxed words are currently in random order. In this case, students have read the short story, *The Two Brothers*, which is about how two brothers have contrasting mindsets about risk and safety. Therefore, the linear array below could be used in conjunction with this text.

risk

hazardous

protected

cautious

uncertain

secure

safety

Adaptation: Students could choose the anchor words; students could generate the words to place between the anchor words.

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### 2. Provide direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction

Teachers should provide adolescents with direct and explicit instruction in comprehension strategies to improve students' reading comprehension. Comprehension strategies are routines and procedures that readers use to help them make sense of texts. These strategies include, but are not limited to, summarizing, asking and answering questions, paraphrasing, and finding the main idea. Comprehension strategy instruction can also include specific teacher activities that have been demonstrated to improve students' comprehension of texts. Asking students questions and using graphic organizers are examples of such strategies. Direct and explicit teaching involves a teacher modeling and providing explanations of the specific strategies students are learning, giving guided practice and feedback on the use of the strategies, and promoting independent practice to apply the strategies.

An important part of comprehension strategy instruction is the active participation of students in the comprehension process. In addition, explicit instruction involves providing a sufficient amount of support, or scaffolding, to students as they learn the strategies to ensure success .

Upper elementary, middle, and secondary school teachers can take several action steps to implement explicit strategy instruction, which involves helping students actively engage in the texts they read. A number of different strategies can be taught directly and explicitly to students and applied to content-area texts they read. Assisting students in learning how to apply these strategies to their texts will empower them and give them more control over their reading and understanding (Kamil et al., 2008).

#### How to carry out the recommendation



1. Select carefully the text to use when first beginning to teach a given strategy.



2. Show students how to apply the strategies they are learning to different texts, not just to one text.



3. Ensure that the text is appropriate for the reading level of students.



4. Use direct and explicit instruction for teaching students how to use comprehension strategies.

### Comprehension Activity – Directed Note Taking

#### A graphic organizer designed to help sort and categorize information from texts

The teacher first identifies categories outlined in the text so that students can read the text on their own and develop notes independently that are aligned with the categories selected by the teacher.

These categories should be aligned with the standards being taught or the reason for the content being taught. As questions for written responses are being considered, it may be most helpful to consider three or four appropriate answers that can be found in the text. These appropriate responses will then become the categories used for directed note taking as aligned with the guiding question.

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In this example, students have read the literary text *The Two Brothers* by Leo Tolstoy, in which two siblings encounter the same situation but interpret it in completely different ways. One brother views the inscription on the stone as an invitation to pursue opportunity, while the other interprets it as a warning filled with danger and uncertainty. Because the story centers on contrasting perspectives and decision-making, the teacher has developed a guiding question that aligns with the standards she is teaching about theme, character motivation, and evaluating how individuals interpret events: How do the two brothers see the same situation completely differently?

The teacher has determined that there are four relevant categories that students can use to gather and organize evidence from the text—risk, safety, reward, and consequence. These categories reflect the major factors influencing each brother’s reasoning. The teacher asks students to find and record at least two notes from the text to support each of the four categories as they prepare to develop a response to the guiding question.

<b>Directed Note Taking</b>					
<b>Directions:</b> Record notes containing the most important information relevant to the guiding question.					
<i>The Two Brothers</i>					
<b>Guiding Question:</b> How do the two brothers see the same situation completely differently?					
Paragraph #	Notes	Check relevant categories below			
		Risk	Safety	Reward	Consequence

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### 3. Provide opportunities for extended discussion of text meaning and interpretation

One way teachers can help students improve their reading comprehension is to provide opportunities for high-quality discussions that focus on the meaning and interpretation of texts. These discussions can occur in various content area classrooms and can be conducted in a whole-group or small-group setting.

Discussions that focus on building a deep understanding of the author’s meaning, or critically analyzing or challenging the author’s conclusions, can promote students’ comprehension of complex texts.

In effective discussions students have the opportunity to engage in sustained interactions with the teacher or with one another, present and defend their interpretations and points of view using the text, background knowledge, and reasoning to support their ideas. They should also listen to the arguments of their peers and be able to respond with reasoned thoughts and counterpoints (Kamil et al., 2008).

#### How to carry out the recommendation



1. Carefully prepare for the discussion by selecting engaging materials and development stimulating questions.



2. Ask follow-up questions that help provide continuity and extend the discussion.



3. Provide a task or discussion format that students can follow when they discuss text in small groups.



4. Develop and practice the use of specific “discussion protocol.”

#### Whole Group Extended Text Discussion Activity – Facilitating an Extended Text Discussion

Step	Description	Example
Teacher Planning	<p>Teachers choose texts or topics that might be difficult, misunderstood, ambiguous, or have multiple interpretations.</p> <p>Teachers develop questions that stimulate students to think reflectively about the text and to make high-level connections or inferences.</p> <p>Teachers create a scenario that allows students to take a position and defend it using information from the text.</p>	<p>An eighth-grade English language arts teacher wants her students to understand how characters can interpret the same situation in completely different ways based on their beliefs, values, and perceptions. She selects Leo Tolstoy’s short story <i>The Two Brothers</i> because it provides a clear contrast between two approaches to decision-making: one focused on risk and potential reward, the other focused on safety and possible consequences. The text is brief but rich with opportunities for analysis and discussion, making it well suited for extended interpretation.</p> <p>The teacher develops the following question for consideration: “Which category—risk, safety, reward, or consequence—has the greatest impact on the meaning of the story?”</p> <p>The teacher divides students into small groups and asks them to review the story for examples that support each of the four categories, using those details to determine which category is most influential in shaping the story’s theme.</p>

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Step	Description	Example
Student Preparation	<p>In small groups, students talk about the question(s) the teacher provided.</p> <p>Students review the text with the question in mind and determine, as a group, a position or stance to take in response to the question.</p> <p>Students take notes from the text to support their position.</p> <p>Students discuss how to present their position to the whole group and choose a spokesperson.</p>	<p>After reading <i>The Two Brothers</i>, students discuss the question, “Which category—risk, safety, reward, or consequence—has the greatest impact on the meaning of the story?” They reach consensus within their group, selecting one category they believe is most significant.</p> <p>Students return to the text and take notes to use in the discussion that validate their position of risk, safety, reward, or consequence.</p> <p>Students choose a spokesperson for their group and help him/ her prepare to present their stance.</p>
Teacher Facilitates Student Discussion	<p>Teachers ask the student groups to share the position they chose.</p> <p>Teachers asks each spokesperson to explain why their group took their stance, using evidence from the text to support their position.</p> <p>Groups are provided opportunities to defend their positions throughout the discussion.</p> <p>Teachers ask students to elaborate to extend their conversation, but do not validate any one position.</p> <p>At the end of the discussion, students revisit their position and may change their stance based on information presented by other groups.</p>	<p>The teacher asks each group’s spokesperson to indicate whether they chose risk, safety, reward, or consequence as the most influential category in the story. The teacher records how many groups selected each option, as well as individual votes when groups had to negotiate.</p> <p>The teacher selects one group to begin presenting. After the first group explains its position using text evidence, other groups with the same stance may add elaboration. Groups that selected other categories then present their arguments and examples. Finally, students are given time to offer rebuttals or respond to other perspectives.</p> <p>At the end of the discussion, the teacher takes a final individual vote to see whether any students changed their position based on new evidence or insights presented during the discussion.</p>

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### 4. Increase student motivation and engagement in literacy learning

To foster improvement in adolescent literacy, teachers should use strategies to enhance students' motivation to read and engagement in the learning process. Teachers should help students build confidence in their ability to comprehend and learn from content area texts. They should provide a supportive environment that views mistakes as growth opportunities, encourages self-determination, and provides informational feedback about the usefulness of reading strategies and how the strategies can be modified to fit various tasks. Teachers should also make literacy experiences more relevant to students' interests, everyday life, or important current events.

Although the words motivation and engagement are often used interchangeably, they are not always synonymous. Whereas motivation refers to the desire, reason, or predisposition to become involved in a task or activity, engagement refers to the degree to which a student processes text deeply through the use of active strategies and thought processes and prior knowledge. It is possible to be motivated to complete a task without being engaged because the task is either too easy or too difficult. Research shows that the messages teachers communicate to students—intentionally or unintentionally—can affect students' learning goals and outcomes (Kamil et al., 2008).

#### How to carry out the recommendation



1. Establish meaningful and engaging content learning goals around the essential ideas of a discipline as well as the specific learning processes students use to access those ideas.



2. Provide a positive learning environment that promotes students' autonomy in learning.



3. Make literacy experiences more relevant to students' interests, everyday life, or important current events.



4. Build in certain instructional conditions, such as student goal setting, self-directed learning, and collaborative learning, to increase reading engagement and conceptual learning for students.



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### Motivation and Engagement Activity – Developing a “Hook” Question

Student engagement in complex thinking can be promoted by strategically introducing students to the topic of a text that students will read. It takes a well-crafted question to simultaneously grab student interest, focus student attention on the topic, and launch a quality opening discussion. This “hook” question needs to help students see the relevance of the topic and find a purpose for reading the text. In order to create these discussion dynamics, the “hook” question requires strategic planning of the following two elements:

- format of the question
- teacher expectation of student response to the question

The format of an effective “hook” question is important to consider:

- **Question Stem/Topic:** The first part of the “hook” is the stem. It is written in question form and focuses on a world-relevant topic that can capture student interest. The question stem takes a broad perspective connected to the themes of the short story students are preparing to read. In this case, *The Two Brothers* centers on decision-making, personal values, and how individuals evaluate risk. Therefore, a broad, real-world stem might ask students to consider their own attitudes toward taking risks:

Do you consider yourself a risk-taker?

Student responses might include situations involving sports, friendships, trying new activities, making life decisions, or avoiding risks altogether.

- **Student Options:** The “hook” question can be open-ended, or the stem may segue into two or three options from which students may choose to take a position. For example, the question above could be extended to:

Do you consider yourself a risk-taker, a cautious person, or someone who depends on the situation?

This allows students to reflect on their own tendencies, compare differing perspectives, and prepare for the contrasting viewpoints presented in the story.

Since a “hook” question sets the tone for subsequent text reading, its alignment with state standards may be helpful in keeping students focused on significant big ideas in text throughout their pre-reading discussion.

#### Teacher Expectations

The “hook” question is designed to set up a brief whole-group conversation, but it may be helpful for students to talk about their thoughts with a partner before the class engages in the main discussion. The teacher should establish the expectation that each speaker provides an explanation for his or her response or position. Throughout this discussion, the teacher uses contrasts in student responses as the basis for deciding who to call upon for comment. Such expectations stir students’ emotional investment in the topic and maximize student engagement in their own learning.

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### The Two Brothers

Two brothers set out on a journey together. At noon they lay down in a forest to rest. When they woke up, they saw a stone lying next to them. There was something written on the stone, and they tried to make out what it was.

"Whoever find this stone," they read, "let him go straight into the forest at sunrise. In the forest a river will appear; let him swim across the river to the other side. There he will find a she-bear and her cubs. Let him take the cubs from her and run up the mountain with them, without once looking back. On the top of the mountain, he will see a house, and in that house he will find happiness."

When they had read what was written on the stone, the younger brother said:

"Let us go together. We can swim across the river, carry off the bear cubs, take them to the house on the mountain, and together find happiness."

"I am not going into the forest after bear cubs," said the elder brother, "and I advise you not to go. In the first place, no one can know whether what is written on this stone is the truth --perhaps it was written in jest. It is even possible that we have not read it correctly. In the second place, even if what is written here is the truth -- suppose we go into the forest and night comes, and we cannot find the river. We shall be lost. And if we do find the river, how are we going to swim across it? It may be broad and swift. In the third place, even if we swim across the river, do you think it is an easy thing to take her cubs away from the she-bear? She will seize us, and, instead of finding happiness, we shall perish, and all for nothing. In the fourth place, even if we succeeded in carrying off the bear cubs, we could not run up a mountain without stopping to rest. And, most important of all, the stone does not tell us what kind of happiness we should find in that house. It may be that the happiness awaiting us there is not at all the sort of happiness we would want."

"In my opinion," said the younger brother, "you are wrong. What is written on the stone could not have been put there without reason. And it is all perfectly clear. In the first place, no harm will come to us if we try. In the second place, if we do not go, someone else will read the inscription on the stone and find happiness, and we shall have lost it all. In the third place, if you do not make an effort and try hard, nothing in the world will succeed. In the fourth place, I should not want it thought that I was afraid of anything."

The elder brother answered him by saying, "The proverb says: 'In seeking great happiness small pleasures may be lost.' And also: 'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.'"

The younger brother replied, "I have heard: 'He who is afraid of the leaves must not go into the forest.' And also: 'Beneath a stone no water flows.'"

The younger brother set off, and the elder remained behind.

No sooner had the younger brother gone into the forest, than he found the river, swam across it, and there on the other side was the she-bear, fast asleep. He took her cubs and ran up the mountain without looking back. When he reached the top of the mountain the people came out to meet him with a carriage to take him into the city, where they made him their king.

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He ruled for five years. In the sixth year, another king, who was stronger than he, waged war against him. The city was conquered, and he was driven out.

Again, the younger brother became a wanderer, and he arrived one day at the house of the elder brother. The elder brother was living in a village and had grown neither rich nor poor. The two brothers rejoiced at seeing each other, and at once began telling of all that had happened to them.

"You see, said the elder brother, "I was right. Here I have lived quietly and well, while you, though you may have been a king, have seen a great deal of trouble."

"I do not regret having gone into the forest and up the mountain," replied the younger brother. "I may have nothing now, but I shall always have something to remember, while you have no memories at all."

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Source:Public Domain, available at: <http://www.populationme.com/All/Literature/TwoBrothersTolstoyActivity.pdf>

\*\* Please note this text select is suggested reading for elementary and secondary grades.

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