



# Reading as meaning making

## What is reading as meaning making?

Understanding or comprehending what is read is the most important goal for reading and impacts activities within and outside of school (Pearson et al., 2020). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) describes reading as an active and complex process that involves:

- understanding written texts
- developing and interpreting meaning
- using meaning as appropriate to type of text, purpose and situation (NAGB, 2017, p. iv).

This paper relates to the following Australian Professional Standards for Teachers

### **Standard 1:**

#### **Know students and how they learn**

- 1.2 Understand how students learn
- 1.3 Students with diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds
- 1.5 Differentiate teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students across a range of abilities

### **Standard 2:**

#### **Know the content and how to teach it**

- 2.1 Content and teaching strategies of the teaching area

### **Standard 3:**

#### **Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning**

- 3.3 Use teaching strategies

### **Standard 4:**

#### **Create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments**

- 4.1 Support student participation

### **Standard 5:**

#### **Assess, provide feedback and report on student learning**

- 5.1 Assess student learning
- 5.2 Provide feedback to students on their learning



Thinking about reading in this way sees it as both the construction of meaning and the application of the constructed meaning. This view of reading is reflected in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the National Assessment Program, Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) assessments. This view is also reflected in the Victorian Curriculum and its broad conceptualisation of texts, including multimodal and digital texts. The reciprocity of the English modes is embedded into this view of reading. If readers are to use the understandings they have constructed from their reading, they will need to be able to compose and create spoken, written or visual multimodal texts.



## What impacts on reading as meaning making?

Many factors affect a reader's capacity to make meaning from what they read. These include:

- cognitive factors, such as, decoding ability, vocabulary knowledge and prior knowledge (Liebfreund, 2021)
- fluency and ease of reading (Duke et al., 2021; Stevens et al., 2017)
- affective factors, such as, motivation, enjoyment and engagement of texts and self-efficacy (Afflerbach, 2022)
- metacognition (Afflerbach, 2022; Liebfreund, 2021).

### Cognitive factors

Text decoding involves several key elements: the connection of graphemes to phonemes, phonemic segmentation, syllabification and the application of knowledge about morphemes all assist the reader to decode text (Ehri, 2020). There is strong correlation between accurate word reading and comprehension. For example, students with low word accuracy have more difficulty comprehending what they read (Liebfreund, 2021).

Additionally, vocabulary has been identified as a component of reading affecting word reading and listening comprehension and impacts on the reader's ability to make inferences (Pearson et al., 2020) from what is

read. The demands of vocabulary knowledge differ across the curriculum areas. Informational texts often include complex, subject specific vocabulary that will affect comprehension, whereas narrative texts, may include unique words, but tend to represent more familiar concepts (Liebfreund, 2021). The implication is that vocabulary should be explicitly taught across all subject areas, so that students can develop breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge, to assist their ability to make meaning from, as well as create texts.

Prior knowledge is also linked to text comprehension, especially with informational texts (Liebfreund, 2021). Prior knowledge of content and text type helps students make meaning by providing context, vocabulary knowledge and associated inferential knowledge. Prior knowledge assists the reader to make connections between the concepts they encounter in texts and to generate the necessary inferences to make meaning from what is read (Pearson et al., 2020). For students to become efficient meaning makers, they need to build knowledge of text type and content, undertake practice with decoding texts, develop and use vocabulary and make links between prior knowledge and the texts they are reading.



## Reading with fluency

A reciprocal relationship exists between reading fluency and comprehension. Fluency supports comprehension and comprehension supports reading fluency (Stevens et al., 2017). However, it cannot be assumed that because a student reads with fluency that they are making meaning (Duke et al., 2021). Good readers are more able to adjust their reading rate than those developing their reading skills (Pearson et al., 2020), slowing down their reading when they are faced with more challenging texts, giving them time to make connections across the text and to use prior knowledge. For more information see Professional Reading — Oral reading fluency.

## Affective factors

Affective factors that can be described as coming from within the child, include reading motivation, enjoyment and engagement of reading and self-efficacy. These factors are interrelated and involve students' identities as readers. Motivation is defined as a stimulus or influence (Afflerbach, 2022), playing an important role in reading, by supporting sustained attention and reading perseverance. A positive association exists between motivation to read and reading ability and reading growth, impacting on reading frequency (Liebfreund, 2021). Motivation has also been linked to comprehension, with students who comprehend texts more likely to be motivated readers (Pearson et al., 2020). Motivation increases the reader's application of known comprehension strategies and hence engagement with texts (Liebfreund, 2021). Engaged readers are intrinsically motivated readers, who will extend and challenge themselves with their reading. Reading motivation can be addressed when students are reading texts they find interesting and readable. The classroom environment can support motivated and engaged readers, by providing real world connections to reading, interesting texts and meaningful choices about what, when and how to read (Afflerbach, 2022). Related to motivation and engagement is reading enjoyment and reading



for pleasure (Kucirkova and Cremin (2020). For more information, see Professional Reading – Reading engagement and enjoyment.

Self-efficacy beliefs are associated with students' reading achievements, with studies indicating that children with higher self-efficacy apply more effort and persistence in challenging situations (Rominus et al., 2023). Students with reading self-efficacy believe that they can succeed, perceive that they are in control of their reading, take the initiative when they face reading challenges, and are motivated to read (Afflerbach, 2022).

## Metacognition

Metacognition relates to the monitoring of meaning making and knowing when what is being read is not being understood (the ability to identify the break down of meaning or self-check for meaning). Metacognition involves goal setting, monitoring goals, noting and fixing problems and reflecting on reading (Pearson et al., 2020). Developing readers do not always realise that they are not understanding the text and therefore miss out on opportunities to fix misunderstandings, resulting in lower levels of comprehension (Afflerbach, 2020). These and other research studies have demonstrated that metacognition is an important outcome of comprehension instruction and an influence on comprehension performance. However, Pearson et al. (2020) note that metacognition has not always been prioritised in reading instruction, especially in the early years of primary school. As metacognition is central to the process of meaning making, it is an important priority in reading (Afflerbach, 2022).



# What conditions foster meaning making?

## Assessment

The effective teaching of reading comprehension is informed by teacher's knowledge of what the students know and can do and what they need to learn. In Victoria, [several Literacy and English assessments](#) such as the English Online Interview (EOI) are available for teachers to use. Many formal assessments provide information about reading strategies and skills, such as: phonological awareness, including phonemic awareness; phonics; fluency; vocabulary; and aspects of comprehension, such as identifying literal information, inferential thinking, and evaluating texts. The EOI also assesses oral language and writing. These aspects of reading are central to understanding students' progress in reading aligned with the Victorian Curriculum for English. However, Afflerbach (2022) warns that test scores only tell us about what is tested, that is, strategies and skills. If a broad conceptualisation of reading is accepted, one which recognises that reading comprehension is impacted upon by affective factors and by students' ability to engage in metacognitive practices, then test scores must be supplemented with information about students' engagement and enjoyment, motivation to read, self-efficacy and use of metacognitive

strategies. Assessment practices which provide information for teachers to build their knowledge of their students' comprehension and as meaning makers include:

- [reading conferences](#)
- responses to texts to aid reflection, for example, [the three sharings, four kinds of sayings or the think, puzzle, explore framework](#)
- [talk about texts](#) and [extended talk and dialogic talk](#)
- [teacher to student feedback](#), including text and task specific feedback, setting and monitoring reading goals, and monitoring reading progress
- [student to teacher feedback](#), including students' self-assessment, sharing reading interests and monitoring motivation, engagement and enjoyment of reading
- [peer to peer feedback](#), including revision of thinking, discussing reading choice and reflecting on reading goals
- the teaching of metacognitive strategies.

A comprehensive assessment schedule will allow for formal and informal assessment, which utilises teacher observation and seeks to understand students' reading as both cognitive and affective skills.



## What does effective teaching to meet the needs of diverse learners look like?

Effective reading instruction attends to the range of students' needs (Afflerbach, 2022), relying on a strong link between assessment and teaching. [High impact teaching strategies](#) (HITS) are supportive instructional practices for a wide range of learners and can be applied to the teaching of reading. An effective reading program will organise reading content in a way that scaffolds students' understandings and skill development. It will include comprehensive teaching of phonological development, phonics, fluency, oral language, vocabulary and comprehension strategies. It will help readers engage with and enjoy texts, be motivated to read, develop self-efficacy and employ metacognitive strategies. Reading and the teaching of reading are complex. Teachers might highlight a particular aspect of reading, such as decoding, but research indicates that addressing multiple skills together is more powerful for reading development and growth (NAGB, 2017).

Teachers can draw on the [Gradual Release of Responsibility Model](#) when teaching comprehension. This model is based on the understanding that teachers explicitly teach and scaffold

students' learning then gradually withdraw support as students become more able to take over the ownership of their learning (Fisher & Frey, 2021). Use of [think-alouds](#) provides students with insights into the processes competent readers use to make meaning (Fisher & Frey, 2021), for example, how background knowledge can be used to make meaning from a text (Pressley et al., 2023).

Teaching must explicitly support students to develop comprehension strategies, including complex comprehension strategies, such as analysis, integration and critique (Pearson, 2020). Explicit comprehension strategy teaching improves students' comprehension (Duke et al., 2021). A notion that has gained some popularity is that comprehension strategies are not the most useful aspects to teach, instead teachers focus on knowledge building and word reading. However, this is not supported by research findings (for example Duke et al., 2021). Additionally, Duke et al., (2021) argue the need for explicit teaching of decoding occurs alongside comprehension. They argue for a simultaneous model of teaching reading that addresses comprehension strategies as well



as decoding from the time students begin learning to read, including comprehension monitoring to alert the reader when meaning is not made.

Duke et al. (2021) argue that differentiated and layered teaching of comprehension is needed to meet the diverse needs of students. Drawing on extensive research, they posit that the teaching of comprehension should be adjusted according to students' strengths and challenges. Culturally and linguistically diverse students or students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds may need greater support in developing background knowledge and vocabulary to demonstrate their comprehension. Students with additional learning needs may also require additional support, for example, individual or small group discussions before, during and after reading; the provision of extra scaffolding to highlight how meaning is made and/or recapping previous learning.

Beginning and more advanced readers should be taught metacognitive strategies. Afflerbach (2022) argues that children develop metacognitive thinking between the ages of 3 and 5, and therefore as they learn phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension, so too should they develop the means to evaluate reading strategies. Metacognitive strategies include, thinking about the purpose for reading, identifying

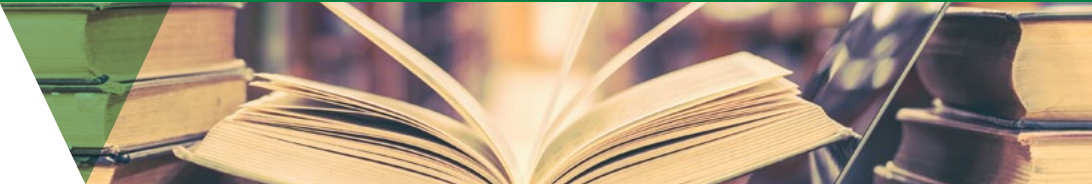
the type of text and how it will be read, linking to background knowledge, recognising when meaning is compromised and using fixing strategies, such as re-reading or slowing down the reading, asking questions while reading, and identifying unknown vocabulary.

## The classroom environment

Classroom environments can support comprehension (Afflerbach, 2022). Students need access to a range of texts, including multimodal texts, which cater for their interests and enhance reading motivation, engagement and enjoyment. It is imperative that students attain reading success, as it is instrumental in fostering self-efficacy and cultivating their identities as confident, capable readers.

Opportunities for students to collaborate around reading promote engagement (Fisher & Frey, 2021). Collaborative interactions promote the use of academic language with peers, sharing of opinions and ideas, and problem solving (Fisher & Frey, 2021). [Readers Theatre](#) and small group discussions about texts are examples of collaborative activities. Classroom activities which foster reading interest through hands-on activities, such as collaborative text responses, choice of reading material and feedback produce significant, positive effects on students' reading motivations and reading comprehension (McBreen & Savage, 2020).





## Dialogic interactions

Opportunities for students to talk about their reading and the texts they encounter promotes social interaction which fosters student engagement and contributes to cognitive growth (Pearson et al., 2020). Planning for dialogic interactions creates opportunities for students to ask and respond to questions (Fisher & Frey, 2021) and opportunities for students to explain and argue their ideas (Pearson et al., 2020). [Discussions through dialogic interactions](#) can lead students to deeper understanding of the texts they read.

[Independent reading](#) can be used to foster dialogic interactions, as students discuss what they have read and their opinions about the text. Additionally, they can share self-evaluations about how they used a reading strategy. When students have chosen their texts, they can share why they made the text selections and if the texts met the purpose of their reading.

## Using meaning constructed from texts

The view of reading as meaning making recognises the link between reading and writing. Involving students in extended writing activities can improve reading comprehension (Duke et al., 2021). Graham et al. (2018) argues that reading and writing draw from similar knowledge sources and cognitive processes related to meaning making, thereby presenting advantageous opportunities for teaching these skills concurrently. When students write about their reading or respond to texts in writing or through talk, they are using the meaning making constructed during reading. [The teaching and learning cycle](#) is a pedagogical approach to writing, that requires students to comprehend texts, to build background knowledge and to use texts read as models of writing. This approach requires students to make meaning when reading and apply those understandings to create texts.



## Suggestions for further discussion



1. How can we define meaning making when reading (reading comprehension) for our staff, families and students?



2. How does our teaching of reading address motivation, engagement and enjoyment and self-efficacy?



3. What does the research tell us about how and when to teach comprehension strategies? Which strategies do we teach? Are these adequate for our students?



4. Which students believe they can succeed with reading? How can we support the students who don't see themselves as readers? How do we currently monitor and assess our students' development of phonic knowledge in writing? Is it effective? Why? Why not?



5. Do our students read often and widely? What supports can we put in place to help families with wide reading?



6. Do our reading assessment practices consider affective factors, as well as cognitive factors?

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