



RESEARCH
REPORT

Spotlight on Comprehension

Executive Summary

Introduction

The gradual release of responsibility model begins with modeled instruction, then shifts to guided instruction and collaborative learning, and concludes with independent application (Fisher & Frey, p. 3).

Sundance’s *Spotlight on Comprehension* is a comprehensive reading program, aligned to the *Common Core State Standards*, that carries out the gradual release of responsibility model, progressing from teacher-led modeling and guided practice to student independent learning and achievement. This program focuses on teaching key reading comprehension skills and strategies, building vocabulary, and increasing reading fluency.

The purpose of this document is to demonstrate how *Spotlight on Comprehension* “links” to research on effective English language arts instruction. To clearly identify how the program addresses the recommendations of the *Common Core State Standards*, this document is organized in the following four areas of key criteria: (1) text selection, (2) close reading and comprehension, (3) writing, speaking, and listening instruction, and (4) vocabulary and language instruction.

The format of each key criterion includes the following sections:

Research Findings

This section references specific recommendations of the *Common Core State Standards* and cites recent research studies and summaries.

Research Implications

This section highlights specific features of the materials and lessons that illustrate how *Spotlight on Comprehension* addresses the research recommendations.

Foundational Research Basis for Spotlight on Comprehension

The Role of Text Selection

Research Findings

- ✓ “To build a foundation for college and career readiness, students must read widely and deeply from among a broad range of high-quality, increasingly challenging literary and informational texts.” (*NGA Center and CCSSO 2010, p. 7*)
- ✓ Coleman and Pimentel, two of the lead authors of the *Common Core State Standards*, point out that students need to have many choices available for independent reading that appeal to their interests and cover a wide variety of genres, subjects, and formats. These texts should include fiction, informational texts, and literary nonfiction. (*Coleman & Pimentel 2012, p. 4*)
- ✓ Classrooms must be literacy-rich environments, chock-full of engaging texts at varying levels of complexity. And students need sufficient time daily to read and write. Readers get better at reading by reading. (*Harvey & Goudvis, 2007*)
- ✓ The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) recommends that the percentages of literary and informational texts that students are reading in assessment materials when they are first tested at grade 4 is fifty-fifty. This percentage changes to a greater percentage of informational texts as students progress into middle school and high school. (*National Assessment Governing Board 2008, p. 11*)
- ✓ Students need to have access to “short, self-contained texts” that allow them to closely analyze and fully comprehend the texts, reading and re-reading as necessary to think about the meaning and ideas presented. (*Coleman & Pimentel 2012, p. 4*)
- ✓ Students need to be reading authentic texts as opposed to anthologies, excerpts, or textbooks in order to truly think analytically about the text in an advance way. (*Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman 2012, p. 30*)

Research Implications

The *Spotlight on Comprehension* materials engage students with different types of texts at varying complexity levels.

- The Big Books and Student Books (in print and digital formats) in this program have a variety of authentic fiction and nonfiction texts. The literary genres include realistic fiction, historical fiction, legends, mysteries, humorous fiction, and poetry. The nonfiction texts include procedures, reports, explanations, arguments, opinions, and discussions.
- Students read diverse text formats, from diaries, personal recounts, and interviews to essays, newspaper articles, and advertisements.
- The Big Books and Student Books contain age-appropriate topics covering a wide range of content areas and stories, ensuring that students find books that appeal to their interests.
- Each Student Book is carefully leveled and designated with a Guided Reading Level and a Lexile[®] measure, enabling teachers to provide students with high-quality, complex texts that are just right for their reading level.
- The assessment selections on the CD-ROM also expose students to a variety of fiction and nonfiction texts, similar to what they will experience on the standardized tests.
- In accordance with the NAEP's suggestions, the percentage of fiction to nonfiction is fifty-fifty in the Student Books for grades 1–4. The Student Books in grades 5 and 6 include more nonfiction than fiction titles. This distribution prepares students for their first standardized assessment at grade 4 and the increase in nonfiction on the standardized tests that they will encounter in grade 8.
- Each Student Book and Big Book selection in this program is self-contained. Each Big Book selection is two pages long, allowing for focused teacher-led modeling of the specific comprehension skill. The Student Books are 18 pages (grade 1) and 24 pages (grades 2–6) long, providing students with manageable, in-depth texts.
- The authentic texts of this program have been written to practice a certain reading comprehension skill, but their rich content allows them to be used for additional practice with other skills and strategies.

Focus on Close Reading Instruction

Research Findings

- ✓ The standards center around “students reading closely to draw evidence and knowledge from the text.” (Coleman & Pimentel 2012, p. 1)
- ✓ According to the *Common Core State Standards*, as students develop their abilities to meet the standards, they show their ability to read independently, increase their content knowledge, understand and analyze what they read, and draw on evidence to explain their analysis. (NGA Center and CCSSO 2010, p. 7)
- ✓ Effective teachers model useful strategies they want readers to adopt when responding to questions, such as: returning to the text to find an answer; using information from the text and knowledge in their head; evaluating text using a rubric; or using graphic organizers to categorize information. (McCardle, Chhabra & Kapinus 2008)
- ✓ Students need direct instruction in reading comprehension strategies and skills to enable them to do the work required by the *Common Core State Standards*. (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman 2012, p. 29)
- ✓ Modeling effectively requires teachers to demonstrate their own thinking. In doing so, they need to explain how a good reader sorts through the information in a text. (Fisher & Frey 2008, pp. 4–5)
- ✓ Explicit instruction of reading comprehension strategies is effective in improving student comprehension. (National Reading Panel 2000; Pressley 2001)
- ✓ A set of specific comprehension strategies that have firm scientific basis for improving text comprehension include: monitoring comprehension, using graphonic and semantic organizers, answering questions, generating questions, recognizing text structure, summarizing. These strategies can be taught through cooperative and collaborative learning. As they become good readers, students learn to use multiple strategies flexibly. (*Put Reading First* 2006, pp. 41–47)
- ✓ Reading strategies help students gain information and understanding from the text. The instruction of reading strategies needs to be an integral part of the act of reading, while always focusing on the specific text under study. (Coleman & Pimentel 2012, p. 9)
- ✓ As Fisher and Frey note, “when learners have a skill or strategy modeled, and not just merely told, they gain a deeper understanding for when to apply it, what to watch for, and how to analyze their success.” (Fisher and Frey 2008, p. 24)

Research Implications

The *Spotlight on Comprehension* materials require students to read closely and think critically. They provide text-specific instruction to support teachers in fostering these skills in their students.

- The inside back cover of each Student Book lists a literal, an inferential, and a critical thinking question about the text. In the digital formats of the Student Books, these three levels of higher-order thinking questions are located at point of use in the text. In addition, the reproducible worksheets in the Teacher Guide are practice materials for higher-order thinking skills. They accompany each Student Book and provide unique literal, inferential, and critical thinking questions. Together, these features allow students ample practice in reading closely and using textual evidence to support claims.
- The gradual release of responsibility instruction in this program moves students toward reading independently after they have seen a particular comprehension skill modeled as well as practiced in a small group.
- This program focuses on key comprehension skills and strategies. As recommended by *Put Reading First*, the comprehension strategies covered at every grade are: identifying text structures, questioning, monitoring comprehension, vocabulary, using graphic organizers, summarizing, applying multiple strategies, and cooperative learning. In conjunction with these strategies, the program provides direct instruction of essential comprehension skills that students learn to use automatically in order to pull out meaning from the text. These skills, which spiral throughout the grades, are: identifying detail, main idea, compare and contrast, sequencing, fact and opinion, cause and effect, bias and prejudice, and figurative language.
- The explicit instruction in the Teacher Guides enables teachers to model the skills and strategies multiple times with different text types. The Big Books provide teachers with the materials they need to effectually communicate to students how to utilize a skill or strategy. This helps students recognize effective techniques to implement the skills in a meaningful way that aids in their comprehension of the text.
- The activities on the Interactive Whiteboard and Assessment CD-ROM engage students in a hands-on format for implementing the comprehension skills while providing them with the right amount of scaffolding to improve their understanding of the skills. The digital books also provide students with an interactive format in which to practice the comprehension skills and strategies they have learned. This format includes tools that enable students to mark, highlight, and make marginal notes as they think critically about what they are reading.

Writing, Speaking, and Listening Instruction

Research Findings

- ✓ The standards focus on students' abilities to use the texts they've read as the basis for their written responses. (*NGA Center and CCSSO 2010, p. 8*)
- ✓ To become strong writers, students need "expert instruction, time to write, and meaningful opportunities for writing." (*Caulkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman 2012, p. 18*)
- ✓ Materials in the classroom aligned to the standards need to provide ample opportunities for written responses, while providing instructors with rubrics and student samples for support. (*Coleman & Pimentel 2012, p. 11*)
- ✓ The speaking and listening standards require students to "learn to work together, express and listen carefully to ideas, integrate information from oral, visual, quantitative, and media sources, evaluate what they hear, use media and visual displays strategically to help achieve communicative purposes, and adapt speech to context and task." (*NGA Center and CCSSO 2010, p. 8*)
- ✓ Worthwhile discussions are necessary for students to achieve the high demands of the speaking and listening standards, which are integral to the reading and writing standards. (*Caulkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman 2012, pp. 168–169*)
- ✓ The gradual release of responsibility model indicates that learning happens through communicating with others. In addition to students working with the teacher, it is equally important that they also communicate with their peers. (*Fisher & Frey 2008, p. 3*)

Research Implications

The *Spotlight on Comprehension* materials integrate writing, speaking, and listening instruction with reading comprehension instruction.

- The reproducible worksheets (practice materials for higher-order thinking skills) for each Big Book selection and each Student Book are designed to supply students practice in composing complete answers to thought-provoking questions. These materials also aid students in organizing information from the text and their own ideas in graphic organizers that can then be used for more formal written responses.
- The constructive writing response activities on the Interactive Whiteboard and Assessment CD-ROM provide additional writing practice. Sample responses for each activity are included, as well as a rubric for evaluating students' writing.
- Every Big Book selection and Student Book has a text-specific lesson plan in the Teacher Guide. These plans provide suggestions for meaningful discussions with the whole class and small groups about the text, its vocabulary, and the skills used to understand its meaning.
- Through the use of the guided practice reproducible worksheets (practice materials for higher-order thinking), students may work in pairs or small groups as they strengthen the skills that the teacher has modeled for them with the Big Books.
- The CD-ROM and the digital books contain further opportunities for students to work collaboratively. Students may work together through the CD-ROM activities and higher-order thinking skill questions in the digital books, or they may complete the research task included with each digital book in small groups.

Vocabulary and Language Instruction

Research Findings

- ✓ The Common Core language standards require students to “determine or clarify the meaning of grade-appropriate words.” (*NGA Center and CCSSO 2010, p. 25*)
- ✓ Tier two words, called general academic words in the standards, are words that are encountered across disciplines. Enhancing understanding of these words is an effective means for improving students’ vocabulary. (*Beck, McKeown, Kucan 2002, p. 8; NGA Center and CCSSO Appendix A 2010, p. 35*)
- ✓ Vocabulary learning is effective when students are actively engaged in learning tasks. (*National Reading Panel 2000; McKeown & Beck 2004; Pressley & Fingeret 2007; Allington 2012*)
- ✓ Instruction for using context clues should focus on the process of determining a word’s meaning based on the context, instead of concentrating on the end result of defining the word. (*Beck, McKeown, Kucan 2002, p. 115*)
- ✓ Vocabulary can be developed indirectly, when students engage daily in oral language, listen to adults read to them, and read extensively on their own and directly, when students are explicitly taught both individual words and word learning strategies. (*Put Reading First 2006, p. 30*)
- ✓ Vocabulary instruction is most effective when learners are given both definitional and contextual information, when learners actively process the new word meanings, and when they experience multiple encounters with the words. (*Graves & Watts-Taffe 2002, p. 143*)

Research Implications

The *Spotlight on Comprehension* materials incorporate specific vocabulary and language instruction.

- Each Student Book lesson plan in the Teacher Guide focuses on a particular tier two word. It gives direct instruction on how teachers can guide students to use the context, in conjunction with word origins or word parts when applicable, in order to better understand the word's meaning as it is used in the text.
- Each lesson plan provides direct instruction for a text-related grammar, usage, or mechanics skill. This skill is then reinforced on the corresponding reproducible worksheet. Additional language skills are also covered in the activities written for English Language Learners in each lesson plan.
- The gradual release of responsibility instruction indirectly aids students' vocabulary development as they listen to texts being read aloud, participate in guided practice readings, and then read independently.
- The vocabulary activities in the lesson plans and reproducible worksheets (practice materials for higher-order thinking skills) rely on using context clues, identifying word parts and related words, and consulting a dictionary when necessary. Many of the vocabulary terms called out in the lesson plans appear multiple times in the text.

The Role of Assessment

According to Coleman and Pimentel, materials that are aligned to the *Common Core State Standards* need to “offer frequent and easily implemented assessments, including systems for record keeping and follow-up.” (Coleman & Pimentel 2012, p. 10)

Formal and informal assessment opportunities in the *Spotlight on Comprehension* program are designed to help teachers (1) monitor progress toward literacy goals; and (2) adjust instruction and text levels according to student progress.

The program provides teachers with checklists for assessing students’ understanding of the key comprehension strategies and skills. It also includes rubrics and student writing samples to guide teachers in their evaluation of student progress. Reproducible worksheets (practice materials for higher-order thinking skills) accompany each teacher guide to assess comprehension, vocabulary, and other language arts skills. Students are also asked to perform a variety of written tasks to demonstrate their understanding, which may serve as informal assessment for instructors as well as practice for constructed response and performance tasks.

The Interactive Whiteboard and Assessment CD-ROM provides formal and informal assessments. Students can print their results, so teachers can track their progress. This CD-ROM also contains concise diagnostic assessment pre- and post-tests that teachers can use to evaluate the reading level of each individual student. In addition, the Teacher Guide includes a cold reading as well as a series of leveled questions for each of the skills.

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Prepare Students to Become Active and Successful Readers, Writers and Thinkers.

- **DEVELOP** reading comprehension with research-based and explicit instruction, combined with multiple opportunities to practice and apply comprehension skills, and to evaluate and assess students' progress.
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