

The competent reader

How parents, carers and mentors can help

Before reading you can:

- ask the reader to make predictions about the text. For example:
 - What might it be about?
 - What might happen in the story?
 - What might be the importance of the title?
 - What sort of text is it (a horror story, a newspaper article, etc.)?
- encourage them to take a risk, for example choose a book that they wouldn't normally read.

During reading you can:

- ask the reader to predict how a story will continue. Then ask them to explain their predictions with some reference to what has happened so far
- talk about the way we often 'read between the lines', looking for meanings that are implied but not stated directly. Choose a short piece of text, for example a short newspaper report on a celebrity, and practise looking for facts (what we know) and inferences (what is implied). Talk about the differences
- ask follow-up questions that encourage the reader to explain further their inferences through closer use of textual evidence.

After reading you can:

- encourage them to visit writers' websites and to attend talks and presentations by writers. Better still, go with them
- help the reader to reflect on what they have gained from their reading. Help them to set new targets that build on their reading, for example to read two other novels by the same author by a certain date, or to find out more about a topic by finding and reading another source of information
- praise or reward any positive achievements and progress, for example if they have read far more than usual.

General advice for supporting young readers

Reading is like running in that some people find it easier and can go faster than others. Those who find it easy to read quickly generally derive more satisfaction from the activity, but may still choose not to read when alternative activities are available. Slower readers usually find reading harder work and so require more encouragement. They do need to persevere though as practice will improve their performance and they can go on to derive a lot of pleasure from reading once they identify the reading material that suits them. To improve their reading skills, young readers need to read a mixture of material – some that they find very easy to read and some that challenges them a little. Just like adults, readers will not want to read something challenging every time they pick up a book. But the more they read, the better.

Nevertheless, reading is not simply a process of devouring the pages. Reading is an active process of constructing the meaning of the text. Good readers make sense of what they read and increasingly are able to reflect on the implications of what the author has written. The ultimate purpose of reading is to understand and appreciate the writer's intentions and his or her art so that a confident response can be made.

The implications of this for parents and others supporting young readers are to:

- encourage reading by valuing what they choose to read voluntarily and by suggesting other material to widen the range and increase the level of challenge a little
- try to make some space for reading in the young person's day
- take an interest in what they are reading. Ask interested questions, not questions that sound like a test. If you can read the material yourself and discuss it, so much the better. Talking about what you have read makes you reflect on it, so deepening understanding.

Some discussion of the text and the task before reading is often useful. Try to ensure that the reader has a clear understanding of the task set. They should know:

- if they have to make a detailed response that will require close reading
- if they are looking for some information so that they need to skim and scan the text, changing to close reading when they find the relevant sections
- if they have been asked to read the text for a very specific purpose, for example to compare it to something else.

It may sometimes be useful to help the reader establish the social and historical context of what they are reading.

If readers are reluctant or the assignment looks as if it will be tough going, it is good to stay on hand. It is possible to support the process of reading without taking over. Avoid jumping in too soon if the young person hesitates over an unfamiliar word; try instead to encourage them to work it out for themselves. 'You read some, I'll read some and then we'll talk about it' is a last resort but still better than reading the text for them. If possible organise some little rewards for reaching certain milestones in the reading and know when to suggest a break.

After the reading, give praise for effort and perseverance where it is due and encourage the reader to say something about what he or she has read. Ask open questions that prompt description of what has been experienced without raising the fear of being wrong. Above all try not to reinforce the idea that reading is a chore that has to be endured. Focus instead on the constructive outcomes – what was discovered, what was enjoyed.