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Reading is a skill many people take for granted, but the act of reading and properly comprehending a text is a complex and interactive process. It requires several different brain functions to work together and most often requires one to puzzle through multiple layers of context and meaning. Because reading comprehension is so complicated, we can often find ourselves understanding the most basic interpretation of a text, but missing the emotional core or the "big picture." Or we might just find our brains spinning with no clue at all as to what a text is attempting to convey. But luckily for everyone who struggles in English classes, on standardized tests, or in daily life, reading comprehension can be improved upon (and it's never too late to start!). In this guide, I explain step-by-step how to improve reading comprehension over time and offer tips for boosting your understanding as you read. What Is Reading Comprehension? Reading comprehension is the understanding of what a particular text means and the ideas the author is attempting to convey, both textual and subtextual. In order to read any text, your brain must process not only the literal words of the piece, but also their relationship with one another, the context behind the words, how subtle language and vocabulary usage can impact emotion and meaning behind the text, and how the text comes together as a larger, coherent whole. For instance, let's look at the first line from Jane Austen's novel, *Pride and Prejudice*: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." Now, a completely literal interpretation of the text, just based on word-meaning, would have us believe that 'all rich men want wives.' But the context, word choice, and phrasing of the text actually belie that interpretation. By using the phrases "universally acknowledged" and "must be in want of" (emphasis ours), the text is conveying a subtle sarcasm to the words. Instead of it being an actual truth that 'rich men want wives,' this one sentence instantly tells us that we're reading about a society preoccupied with marriage, while also implying that the opening statement is something people in that society may believe, but that isn't necessarily true. In just a few short words, Austen conveys several ideas to the reader about one of the main themes of the story, the setting, and what the culture and people are like. And she does so all the while seeming to contradict the literal words of the piece. Without practice in reading comprehension, nuances like these can become lost. And so it can happen that someone may find themselves reading, but not truly comprehending the full meaning of a text. As you can see, reading comprehension involves many processes happening in your brain at once, and thus it can be easy for some aspects of a text to get lost in the muddle. But the good news for anyone who struggles is that reading comprehension is a skill just like any other. It must be learned through practice, focus, and diligence, but it absolutely CAN be learned. Does your school report your GPA as weighted or unweighted? What would your GPA be, considered on a 4.0, 5.0, or 6.0 scale? Use our tool to calculate your unweighted and weighted GPA to figure out how you stack up against other college applicants. You'll also get our proprietary college core GPA calculation and advice on where to improve to be a better college applicant. Why Reading Comprehension Is Important Proper reading comprehension can be difficult, so why bother? Even though learning how to properly read and comprehend texts is a complicated process, it is a necessary skill to master, both for work and for pleasure. You will need to know how to read and interpret all kinds of different texts—both on the basic, literal level and on a more in-depth level—throughout your schooling, in college, and in the working world (as well as in your recreation time!). If we think about "reading" just as a literal or surface understanding of a piece and "reading comprehension" as the complete understanding, a person can only get by in the world on pure "reading" for so long. Reading comprehension is essential for many significant aspects of daily life, such as: Reading, understanding, and analyzing literature in your English classes Reading and understanding texts from your other class subjects, such as history, math, or science Doing well on both the written and math sections of the SAT (or all five sections of the ACT) Understanding and engaging with current events presented in written form, such as news reports Properly understanding and responding to any and all other workplace correspondence, such as essays, reports, memos, and analyses Simply taking pleasure in written work on your own leisure time Just like with any goal or skill, we can master reading comprehension one step at a time. How to Improve Reading Comprehension: 3 Steps Because reading comprehension is a skill that improves like any other, you can improve your understanding with practice and a game plan. Dedicate yourself to engaging in a combination of both "guided" and "relaxed" reading practice for at least two to three hours a week. Guided practice will involve structure and focused attention, like learning new vocabulary words and testing yourself on them, while relaxed practice will involve merely letting yourself read and enjoy reading without pressure for at least one to two hours a week. (Note: if you already read for pleasure, add at least one more hour of pleasure-reading per week.) By combining reading-for-studying and reading-for-pleasure, you'll be able to improve your reading skill without relegating reading time to the realm of "work" alone. Reading is a huge part of our daily lives, and improving your comprehension should never come at the cost of depriving yourself of the pleasure of the activity. So what are some of the first steps for improving your reading comprehension level? Step 1: Understand and Reevaluate How You're Currently Reading Before you can improve your reading comprehension, you must first understand how you're currently reading and what your limitations are. Start by selecting excerpts from different texts with which you are unfamiliar—text books, essays, novels, news reports, or any kind of text you feel you particularly struggle to understand—and read them as you would normally. As you read, see if you can notice when your attention, energy, or comprehension of the material begins to flag. If your comprehension or concentration tends to lag after a period of time, start to slowly build up your stamina. For instance, if you continually lose focus at the 20 minute mark every time you read, acknowledge this and push yourself to slowly increase that time, rather than trying to sit and concentrate on reading for an hour or two at a stretch. Begin by reading for your maximum amount of focused time (in this case, twenty minutes), then give yourself a break. Next time, try for 22 minutes. Once you've mastered that, try for 25 and see if you can still maintain focus. If you can, then try for thirty. If you find that your concentration or comprehension starts to lag again, take a step back on your timing before pushing yourself for more. Improvement comes with time, and it'll only cause frustration if you try to rush it all at once. Alternatively, you may find that your issues with reading comprehension have less to do with the time spent reading than with the source material itself. Perhaps you struggle to comprehend the essential elements of a text, the context of a piece, character arcs or motivation, books or textbooks with densely packed information, or material that is heavily symbolic. If this is the case, then be sure to follow the tips below to improve these areas of reading comprehension weakness. Improving your reading comprehension level takes time and practice, but understanding where your strengths and weaknesses stand now is the first step towards progress. Step 2: Improve Your Vocabulary Reading and comprehension rely on a combination of vocabulary, context, and the interaction of words. So you must be able to understand each moving piece before you can understand the text as a whole. If you struggle to understand specific vocabulary, it's sometimes possible to pick up meaning through context clues (how the words are used in the sentence or in the passage), but it's always a good idea to look up the definitions of words with which you aren't familiar. As you read, make sure to keep a running list of words you don't readily recognize and make yourself a set of flashcards with the words and their definitions. Dedicate fifteen minutes two or three times a week to and quizzing yourself on your vocab flashcards. To get started, you'll need some blank index cards and a system to keep them organized. These basic cards are an affordable option that are also available in fun colors. You can keep them organized with plastic baggies or rubber bands, or you can get an organizer. Alternatively, try these easy-flip flashcards that include binder clips. Though we strongly recommend making your own flashcards, you can also buy pre-made ones—the best option is Barron's 1100 Words You Need to Know, a series of exercises to master key words and idioms. In order to retain your vocabulary knowledge, you must employ a combination of practiced memorization (like studying your flashcards) and make a point of using these new words in your verbal and written communication. Guided vocabulary practice like this will give you access to new words and their meanings as well as allow you to properly retain them. Step 3: Read for Pleasure The best way to improve your reading comprehension level is through practice. And the best way to practice is to have fun with it! Make reading a fun activity, at least on occasion, rather than a constant chore. This will motivate you to engage with the text and embrace the activity as part of your daily life (rather than just your study/work life). As you practice and truly engage with your reading material, improvement will come naturally. Begin by reading texts that are slightly below your age and grade level (especially if reading is frustrating or difficult for you). This will take pressure off of you and allow you to relax and enjoy the story. Here are some fun, easy reads that we recommend to get you started: Once you feel more comfortable reading and practicing your comprehension strategies (tips in the next section), go ahead and allow yourself to read at whatever reading or age level you feel like. Even if you feel that you don't understand some of the text right now—or even a large portion of it!—if you enjoy yourself and give it your best shot, you'll find that your reading comprehension levels will improve over time. Ultimately, reading should be a fun and functional activity. So try to keep your reading exercises balanced between work and pleasure. 5 Reading Comprehension Tips Improving your vocabulary and increasing the amount of time you spend reading overall will help you to improve your reading comprehension over time, but what do you do to help you to comprehend a particular piece of text? Here, I'll walk you through the steps to take as you're reading so that you can understand the text and improve how you're reading, when you're reading. Tip 1: Stop When You Get Confused and Try to Summarize What You Just Read As you read, let yourself stop whenever you lose focus or feel confused. Just stop. Now, without re-reading, summarize aloud or in your head what you've comprehended so far (before the place where you became confused). Skim back through the text and compare how you've summarized it with what's written on the page. Do you feel you've captured the salient points? Do you feel a little more focused on what's going on now that you've put the material into your own words? Keep reading with your summation in mind and let yourself stop and repeat the process whenever the piece becomes confusing to you. The more you're able to re-contextualize the work in your own words, the better you'll be able to understand it and lock the information in your mind as you keep reading. Tip 2: If You're Struggling, Try Reading Aloud Sometimes, we can form a sort of "mental block" that can halt our reading progress for whatever reason (maybe the sentence looks complex or awkward, maybe you're tired, maybe you feel intimidated by the word choice, or are simply bored). Reading these problematic passages aloud can often help circumvent that block and help you to form a visual of what the text is trying to convey. Tip 3: Re-read (or Skim) Previous Sections of the Text For the most part, reading is a personal activity that happens entirely in your head. So don't feel you have to read just like anyone else if "typical" methods don't work for you. Sometimes it can make the most sense to read (or re-read) a text out of order. It is often helpful to glance backwards through a piece of text (or even re-read large sections) to remind yourself of any information you need and have forgotten—what happened previously, what a particular word means, who a person was...the list is endless. Previous sentences, sections, or even whole chapters can provide helpful context clues. Re-reading these passages will help to refresh your memory so that you can better understand and interpret later sections of the text. Need more help with this topic? Check out Tutorbase! Our vetted tutor database includes a range of experienced educators who can help you polish an essay for English or explain how derivatives work for Calculus. You can use dozens of filters and search criteria to find the perfect person for your needs. Tip 4: Skim or Read Upcoming Sections of the Text Just like with the previous step, don't feel that the only way to read and understand a text is to work through it completely linearly. Allow yourself the freedom to take apart the text and put it back together again in whichever way makes the most sense to you. Sometimes a current confusion in a work will be explained later on in the text, and it can help you to know that explanations are upcoming or even just to read them ahead of time. So skip forward or backwards, re-read or read ahead as you need to, take the piece in whatever order you need to in order to make sense of the text. Not everyone thinks linearly, and not everyone best understands texts linearly either. Tip 5: Discuss the Text With a Friend (Even an Imaginary Friend) Sometimes discussing what you know so far about a text can help clear up any confusion. If you have a friend who hasn't read the text in question, then explain it to them in your own words, and discuss where you feel your comprehension is lacking. You'll find that you've probably understood more than you think once you've been forced to explain it to someone who's completely unfamiliar with the piece. Even if no one else is in the room, trying to teach or discuss what a passage says or means with "someone else" can be extremely beneficial. In fact, software engineers call this technique "rubber duck debugging," wherein they explain a coding problem to a rubber duck. This forces them to work through a problem aloud, which has proven time and time again to help people solve problems. So if a piece of text has your head spinning from trying to work through it by yourself, start chatting with your nearest friend/pet/rubber duck. You'll be surprised with how much easier it is to understand a text once you've talked it through with someone. Even if that someone is a duck. Quack. The Take-Aways Improving reading comprehension takes time and effort, but it can be done. Be patient with yourself, work through your reading comprehension steps, and try not to get frustrated with yourself if you feel your progress is slow or if you feel you're "falling behind." You will utilize your reading skills throughout your life, so go at a pace that works for you, and take care to maintain that balance between reading for pure pleasure and reading for dedicated improvement. As you begin to incorporate more and more reading into your daily life, you'll find that comprehension will become easier, and reading will become more fun. In every piece of text, there are worlds of meaning to explore, and learning how to uncover them can be the ultimate rewarding journey. What's Next? Can't get enough reading? Whether as part of your reading practice or just for fun, check out our picks for the 31 best books to read in high school. Problems with procrastination? Whether you're studying for the SAT's or studying your reading comprehension vocabulary check out how to beat procrastination and get your studies back on track. Want to earn better grades? Our guide will help you get that 4.0 you're striving for. Want to improve your SAT score by 160 points or your ACT score by 4 points? We've written a guide for each test about the top 5 strategies you must be using to have a shot at improving your score. Download it for free now: These recommendations are based solely on our knowledge and experience. If you purchase an item through one of our links PrepScholar may receive a commission.





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