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Opening the Door: Teaching Students to Use Visualization to Improve Comprehension

Visualizing text is a proven way to improve reading comprehension. It is a technique that can be taught using this simple, step-by-step strategy from literacy consultant Cathy Puett Miller. Included: Tips and resources for developing students' comprehension skills.



"Proficient readers spontaneously and purposely create mental images while and after they read. The images emerge from all five senses as well as the emotions and are anchored in a reader's prior knowledge."
-- Keene and Zimmerman, Mosaic of Thought

Each day, our students are bombarded with the visual images of TV and video games. In contrast, most students view reading as a passive activity. But a simple technique -- visualization -- can transform students of all ages from passive to active readers; visualization can help students cross the boundary to improved comprehension.

Your students will be able to grasp the visualization technique by following a simple, step-by-step plan:

MODELING THE TECHNIQUE

Direct modeling of the active thought processes involved in visualizing text is the first step. Begin with a familiar fiction read-aloud. As you read a short passage, describe images you see in your mind. For example, you might use the following quote from *Where the Wild Things Are*:

"That very night in Max's room a forest grew and grew and grew until his ceiling hung with vines and the walls became the world all around."

After reading that quote, share with students the images you visualized as you read it.

As I read that passage, I thought about the words and I imagined what the characters looked like, what they were doing, and what their surroundings were like. I shared with students that I imagined a window with a moon shining through it. Saplings began to sprout and quickly grew leaves and stems. (The scene was like those time-lapse photography images you see on the Discovery Channel.) I saw little vines spreading their tendrils down the walls and across the ceiling. Before I knew it, the entire room was green and leafy, and much darker than before.

Encourage students to practice the ideas outlined in this article as they read at home.

Assign homework that includes a reading from an assigned text. Ask parents to read the selection -- or part of it -- with their children and discuss the possible images. You might need to provide some direction for parents, because some adults don't have the skill either.

STUDENTS PRACTICE VISUALIZING

When you finish sharing your thoughts, let students try the same technique on their own. Share a highly descriptive reading selection appropriate for students' listening vocabulary level (up to two years above their reading vocabulary). If necessary, before reading share a vocabulary mini-lesson to introduce unfamiliar terms. Depending on the ages of your students, you might choose from the following titles or use a title of your choice that provides excellent descriptive passages.

- Danny Schnitzlein's *The Monster Who Ate My Peas* (ages 4-8, Peachtree Publishers, 2001)
- Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (ages 9-12, Puffin, 1998)

Have students read a pre-printed passage and use the visualization strategies taught in class. Before duplicating the passage, insert a dot or asterisk every 3-4 sentences. Each mark represents a "pause-for-reflection" point -- a point at which students should stop and think about the words they have just read.



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