



Introduction to Comprehension Tool: Make Connections (Background Knowledge)



Background knowledge is all that you as a reader bring to a book: your personal history, all you've read or seen, your adventures, the experiences of your day-to-day life, your relationships, and your passions. All of this becomes your background knowledge.

Background knowledge is like Velcro. It helps new information adhere. The more background knowledge you develop and use, the more you can make sense of and remember new information.

Background knowledge colors how people read. Readers can reread the same novel, poem, short story, or essay and have a very different reaction to it each time because of new and different life experiences in the interim. Different readers can read the same words and have very different reactions because readers all have different background knowledge.

The meaning you get from a piece is intertwined with the meaning you bring to it. A layering occurs, a weaving of past with present, an amalgam of old and new ideas and experiences. As you read, sometimes you need to activate, or awaken, background knowledge, and sometimes you need to build upon it. You strengthen this process each time you read and each time you discuss what you have read. In addition, the very act of living your life adds to your background knowledge.

Talking about your own background knowledge with your students is one of the greatest pleasures you can share. You can tell stories, start conversations, read a page or a paragraph and say, "That reminds me of this book I read, or this story I heard on the news..." or "That makes me remember when..." Sharing your background knowledge is a way to build stronger bonds with your students, to let them get to know you better and get to know them better. As your students listen, ask questions, and understand, they are not just gaining background knowledge from you; they are also sharpening and strengthening their own power over language.

Types of Connections

Encouraging students to make connections around reading (listening): text to self, text to text, and text to world helps students become aware of the background knowledge that they already have. They can also learn how to build their background knowledge.

Text-to-Self

With text-to-self connections, what you read reminds you of something from your own life. Often text-to-self connections carry a strong emotional charge. These types of connections are particularly important because brain research shows that "emotions drive attention, create

meaning, and have their own memory pathways” (Eric Jensen, *Teaching with the Brain in Mind*, page 72). Making an emotional connection helps us to remember what we read.

Text-to-Text

With text-to-text connections, what you read reminds you of something else you have read or seen on television or at the movies.

Text-to-World

When text-to-world connections are made, what you read reminds you of something in the broader world. Books, articles, and stories that make you think about something beyond your own life help you create text-to-world connections.

Model Making Connections

Show your students your connections. As you read to your students, model the different types of connections by reading a page or paragraph and saying, “Oh, that reminds me of....” Take the opportunity to talk about other books you’ve read on a similar topic, to discuss a newspaper article, to bring up things you just wonder about. This is your chance to tell stories, to share vivid memories, funny incidents, and poignant losses. What you are doing is showing your child that reading goes far beyond the words on the page. It goes into your past and out into the world. It connects to books you read 20 years ago and editorials you read yesterday.

Children learn by relating their understanding of something new to what they know already. They need to process what they are reading, to talk about it, write about it, and ponder it. This is how they make the connections that will allow them to remember what they read. When children are fed isolated facts, they might be able to remember them for a short time, but those facts will never make into their long-term memories. A child is much more apt to remember stories, books, and incidents that are meaningful because they connect to other things in his life. Encouraging your students to use their background knowledge and continually add to it is key to helping them become avid and thoughtful readers.

By learning to personalize reading this way, your students will experience the rewards of being an interactive reader. Their connections will lead to predictions, questions, emotional responses, and deeper understanding.

Practice Time

- Have students share their connections during conversations about text. This makes the text more meaningful for all of the children in the room.
- Have students use sticky notes to mark text that they want to share during discussion time.
- Ask students to draw and/or write about their connections