

The **Primary** Comprehension **Toolkit** Language and Lessons for Active Literacy

Stephanie Harvey & Anne Goudvis

Teacher's Guide



Dedication: To Smokey Daniels—our editor extraordinaire, thoughtful colleague, and good friend.
We're thrilled that you can channel our thinking so clearly and keep us laughing along the way.

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Teaching with *The Toolkit*



How to Integrate *The Primary Toolkit* into Your Reading Program and Your Curriculum

As we visit primary classrooms around the country, we recognize three prevalent models for organizing literacy practices and lessons:

- Reading Workshop
- Balanced Literacy or Guided Reading
- Basal Reading or Scripted Program

Now, of course none of these models are ever completely pure. There is plenty of variation within each approach, and there is often some overlap. Mixed models arise. And, of course, there is always a local flavor to each of them when teachers put these national models to work in living classrooms.

But all the models agree on one thing: an effective reading program must teach comprehension explicitly, directly, and recurrently. The scientific research on this is now incontrovertible and overwhelming (National Reading Panel, 2000). With its explicit approach to comprehension instruction and rich array of resources and guides for teaching, *The Primary Comprehension Toolkit* can be a core element in all three of the models.

Using the *Toolkit* in the Reading Workshop

In a traditional craft workshop, young learners are apprenticed to a master craftsperson and immersed in the real work of the trade. When we apply this

approach to literacy instruction in schools, the reading workshop involves much modeling by the teacher, guided practice for the learners, individual coaching and conferring by the veteran practitioner, and the creation of real products (e.g. writings, art work, research reports, social action) aimed at a real audience. Authors and pioneers such as Donald Graves (1991, 2003), Shelley Harwayne (2000), Lucy Calkins (1994), Nancy Atwell (1987, 2003), and others have taken the reading workshop to a high level of refinement. In many school districts, the workshop model has been adopted as the baseline instructional format for reading and writing.

The essential components of comprehension instruction fit seamlessly into a reading workshop model. In *The Primary Comprehension Toolkit*, we model, thinking out loud as we read to kids and showing them how we think through and respond to text. Next we guide them to think about text with us as we read and respond to it together. Once kids have a thorough understanding of the task, we send them off to read and respond on their own, with a partner, or in small groups. During independent or collaborative practice, we move around the room conferring with kids in order to provide individualized and differentiated instruction. Instruction is tailored to meet the needs of each and every child. At the end of the workshop, we come back together as a group to share learning and to build a community of learners through conversation and discussions about reading.

The only difference we can see between *PTK* instruction and the reading workshop model is that when we introduce comprehension strategies and practices for the first time, our lessons take longer than standard minilessons. Our lessons are more like “maxi lessons” than minilessons, and for good reason. We spend more instructional time modeling and guiding so that we can explicitly teach the reading and thinking strategies. We typically model our own thinking and guide kids through a good portion of text so that kids have a clear idea of what to do. Then kids try this out themselves when they are ready. But we don’t do *Toolkit* lessons just once. Subsequent lessons to review and practice thinking strategies can be much shorter, more in the realm of minilessons.

We’ve found the *Toolkit* lessons especially useful in a reading workshop model because the reading and thinking strategies are cumulative. Kids build a repertoire of these that they apply across many texts and genres. Kids use any and all of the strategies during independent practice. Kids internalize the comprehension strategies as tools they can use to understand whatever they read independently as well as books and articles they discuss in literature circles, informational study groups, etc. Most importantly, kids come up with a myriad of creative ways to write, think, talk, and draw about their reading.

Using the *Toolkit* with a Balanced Literacy or Guided Reading Program

Most literacy educators agree that a strong reading program must include an array of key activities and experiences, and that it must carefully allocate time among its key elements. Perhaps the best known models of balanced literacy programs are those described by Fountas and Pinnell (1996) and Cunningham and Hall (2000). They identify exactly what elements need to be balanced over a day, a week, or a year of instruction. These models so strongly feature small-group instruction using carefully leveled text that “guided reading” often becomes the shorthand label for the whole program.

The Primary Toolkit addresses comprehension instruction within the balanced literacy model. There are countless programs addressing phonics and phonemic awareness, fluency, and other important elements of literacy instruction. We've focused our curriculum on comprehension—to make sure that instruction in this all-important aspect of reading is explicit, robust, and thoughtful.

Within a balanced literacy framework, the modeling and guided practice portions of *Toolkit* lessons are a good fit with instructional read-alouds and shared reading. Kids are up close and we use large format text such as big books and posters like the *TFK* posters as we read to and with the children. As we move into the guided practice portion of the lesson, kids often have clipboards so that after we talk and respond together, they write their own responses to leave tracks of their thinking. While they are still up close where we can carefully observe them, we check to see that they are ready to try the task in small groups or on their own.

The Primary Comprehension Toolkit fits like a glove with guided reading practices. *Toolkit* comprehension lessons are perfect for teachers to use as they meet with small guided reading groups. Typically the guided reading lesson reinforces and reviews a strategy we have taught in a whole group lesson previously. The small, flexible, needs-based guided reading group provides an opportunity for teachers to design explicit instruction to meet kids' shared learning needs. As kids read in multiple



copies of text at their level, we use the Lesson Guide to provide instruction. The Lesson Guide supplies the lesson moves and language that can be applied to any text and works seamlessly with leveled guided reading books. The small guided reading group is ideal for assessing how kids use and apply comprehension strategies as they read, giving teachers a good idea of what to teach next.

Often children who are not meeting with the teacher during guided reading time work collaboratively or independently, usually in centers. As part of center work, we have set up tables with books, Post-its, writing paper, markers, etc. so that kids can use the strategies and response options we have introduced in *Toolkit* lessons. This all-important independent practice focuses kids mainly on reading, with short responses that reinforce the strategy that has been taught. Kids might mark a Post-it with an *L* and record new learning, draw a picture to demonstrate thinking, or ask a question to clarify confusion. The emphasis is on authentic response that contributes to learning, rather than responses that simply keep kids busy while the teacher is working with small groups. Kids need to stay busy, but they need to be busy with meaningful work.

Using the *Toolkit* with a Basal Reading or Scripted Program

Most basal programs have plenty of leeway for integrating *Toolkit* comprehension instruction with the selections in the anthology. First of all, anthologies are great sources of additional text for kids. So feel free to use whatever *Toolkit* lesson fits best with selections in the anthology. Also, some users of basal programs have told us that their anthologies lack enough nonfiction to provide kids with solid practice in informational text reading. So integrating the *Toolkit* and its texts with a program provides much-needed, engaging nonfiction for kids.

One thing we have noticed about the comprehension element of many basal reading programs is that although strategies such as asking questions and drawing inferences are mentioned throughout the Teacher's Guide, the basal does not explain how to teach comprehension explicitly. We have yet to see a basal program with robust, in-depth comprehension instruction at its core. Good news! You can't get much more explicit or robust than the *Toolkit* for comprehension instruction. *The Primary Toolkit* gives you both the teaching language and teaching moves to teach a variety of comprehension strategies. So we recommend using the *Toolkit* comprehension lessons to ramp up basal lessons. The Lesson Guide provides an explicit way to teach *Toolkit* comprehension lessons with a basal text.

Beyond the usual range of basal readers, there are some highly-scripted programs that leave little time or space for deviation. In that situation, we simply suggest that you use the comprehension curriculum in the *Toolkit* with science and social studies, as we discuss below and on pages 59–64. Many teachers find that teaching comprehension with the potentially fascinating topics of science and social studies not only strengthens kids' reading skills—it often breathes new life into these sometimes neglected corners of the curriculum.

Using the *Toolkit* in All Subjects Areas—All Day Long

We're with Howard Gardner, who believes that "The purpose of reading is understanding" (1991). If we don't teach kids to actively use, understand, and remember what they read, what else matters? The *Toolkit* lessons and practices teach kids to "read to learn" as they encounter information and ideas in a wide variety of informational texts.

Comprehension instruction occurs during the literacy block for sure, but also throughout the day, over the course of the year, and in all subject areas. We don't view science or social studies as separate subjects, taught as an after-thought an hour or two a week. We're inclined to agree with David Pearson and researchers from the University of California at Berkeley (2006) that literacy practices should be merged with study in a variety of disciplines, all day and every day. In this way, we support kids to build their background knowledge about the world.

So, science and social studies top the list as opportunities for teaching comprehension in a way that broadens and deepens kids' knowledge about the world. Specific suggestions for integrating comprehension across the curriculum abound in the *Toolkit*. On page 64 you'll find full details about "Using *Toolkit* Components in Science and Social Studies." Strategy Book 6 demonstrates how *Toolkit* instruction can be integrated with a unit of study in science and social studies. And take a look at the Content Literacy slideshow and Brad Buhrow's classroom video on the DVD to see how *Toolkit* instruction can reinvigorate neglected or stale content areas.