

Unconventional Comprehension

A strategy for both classroom teachers and homeschoolers

working with gifted learners of all ages



Remember “comprehension” exercises when you were at school? Remember how you were asked to answer questions like these?

- *What was the King doing in his counting house?*
- *What did the Queen have on her bread?*
- *What is a “parlour”?*
- *How many blackbirds were in the pie?*

Exercises like these were designed to help teachers develop and test children’s understanding of what they had read. They had a perfectly valid purpose.

But did you sometimes find them boring? So does the gifted child today! Comprehension questions like these are just far too easy for the exceptionally able child.

Conversely, in multiple choice questions, simplicity can be confusing to the gifted learner, because he or she can so often see why more than one answer could be right. For instance, how would you choose here?

When the King was in his counting house, he was:

- *doing arithmetic*
- *sitting in his arm chair*
- *counting his money*
- *thinking that the Queen spent too much on honey.*

The gifted child can give you a perfectly feasible explanation of how every single one of these is true – so which is the “right” answer? How does the child decide? Like the centipede who was perfectly okay until someone asked him which foot went first, the gifted child can end up getting nowhere at all with questions like these. Meanwhile the average learner realises straightaway that the “right” answer is supposed to be the third choice, “counting his money”, because “that’s what it says in the poem”. Other possibilities simply don’t occur to the average learner.



Changing the questions

Yet even with the most able children, there’s still a need for the teacher to check their depth of understanding of what they read – to check that they see the meaning behind the story, recognise the author’s purpose, grasp the principles and concepts being discussed, understand the techniques being described, and so on.

One way to achieve this for the gifted learner is to ask questions which go beyond the “facts” of a story and ask children to *think about* what they have read.

For example, we can ask questions which require children to *make inferences* or *draw conclusions* about what they have read. Thus:

What do you think will be the outcome for the maid of the blackbird's attack on her?



There is no “one right answer” here, but there is opportunity both for a child to think in depth about the possible impact of such an incident and/or to come up with imaginative ideas about how the situation could be dealt with. For instance, a gifted child is likely to perceive both the immediate distress and fright the maid will feel and the longer term psychological harm; such a child may also find satisfaction in thinking of ingenious ways of protecting the maid from further harm - perhaps designing an artificial nose or a bird-protection helmet.

Similarly, we can ask questions which require children to *form opinions* about what they are reading or to consider inherent ethical issues. Thus:

Who do you think was treated most unfairly here – the King, who found live blackbirds in his pie, or the blackbirds who were trapped inside the pie?

Again there is no “one right answer”, but there is certainly potential for lively discussion about rights and wrongs!

Another way to add to the interest and variety of comprehension tasks for gifted learners is to use an open-ended variation of the multi-choice question. Thus:

When the King was in his counting house, he was multi-tasking. He was:

- *doing arithmetic*
- *thinking that the Queen spent too much on honey*

Can you add to this list?

Like the earlier examples, this works because it takes an unexpected approach, it gives room for the child's own imagination, it's asking the child to think *about* what's been read, and it recognises that the gifted learner prefers a complex rather than a simple task. But it's still checking the child's basic grasp of the material.

Yet its structure is simple. In essence, this activity has been developed simply by taking the original multi-choice question and turning it round so that the gifted learner, instead of being asked to choose between equally probable answers, is invited to find as many additional answers as he or she logically or imaginatively can, while still staying within the bounds of the original story.

Once you've introduced this kind of exercise, gifted learners themselves can be very good at making up questions for each other along similar lines. The process of doing so is actually a comprehension exercise in itself – and fun!

Changing the source

Another excellent way to develop unconventional comprehensions is to *draw on a wider range of source material*. By all means continue to use ordinary text as the basis for some comprehension work, but in addition, use *maps, pictures, photos, advertisements, diagrams, charts, graphs, artwork, sketches, physical objects, newspaper stories, sports writing, science experiments and experiences, letters to the editor, cartoons* and other such material.

For example, a set of statistics about road accidents was used as a basis for one comprehension task; another asked children to look at a map of part of a small town and not only to answer the usual, “How would you get to...” questions, but also to consider issues such as the likely impact of the town meat works being situated next door to the town hospital.

In the first place, comprehension tasks like these greatly extend the kinds of questions you can ask, and add considerable interest and variety. But they also help children develop important skills. How many millions of times each year does someone somewhere:

- miss a train because they misread the timetable?
- wreck an expensive new piece of equipment because they misread the assembly or operating instructions?
- find they’re committed to doing something they didn’t want to do because they misread the fine print?
- end up in hospital because they misread the label on a bottle?

Gifted learners aren’t immune to these kinds of mistakes. Every year hundreds of highly gifted students all over the world don’t turn up at vital exams because they’ve misread the exam schedule, or score disastrously badly because they’ve misread the exam questions. Exceptionally able people can misread just as successfully as the rest of us!

(As an interesting footnote, at a recent New Zealand conference on gifted education, teachers were asked to rate various aspects of the conference on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 meaning excellent and 5 meaning very disappointing. As their attached comments fortunately made obvious, approximately a third of the teachers mis-read the instructions and used the scale in reverse, putting 5 when they meant 1 and vice versa. Teachers can do it too!)

Thus it’s both interesting and relevant to build comprehensions round a wide range of different “real” activities, such as map-reading, filling out forms, interpreting labels, following recipes, assembling equipment, understanding diagrams, using the yellow pages, and so on.

Some variations:

- Copy a set of written instructions for assembling or using any household item and ask children to turn this into a flow-chart or cartoon-strip.

- Alternatively, ask children to write an accurate description or set of instructions for something shown only in a diagram or picture.

(For example, you could ask children to describe a house by working from a floor-plan).

- An interesting and fiendish variation on this which gifted learners enjoy is to give a set of instructions for making something without revealing what the "something" is, and to set them the task of finding out....

Working with books

The concept of “unconventional comprehensions” can also be applied to larger tasks, such as working with a whole book. Once again the types of questions children are asked to answer to demonstrate their understanding of a book often lack any real challenge for the gifted learner. A few examples of less predictable questions, first for fiction and then for non-fiction:

- Why do you think the author chose to set the story in this particular setting? Does the setting make a difference to the story?
- Imagine you are a psychologist. Comment on the behaviour of one of the main characters in this story. Why does this person behave in the way he or she does?
- Choose one of the main characters. How might this character's life be different in the future because of what has happened to him/her in the story?
- You are the author. The publisher has asked you to write a different ending. Plan what you will write, OR write a defence of the current ending, explaining why you think it should be kept.
- Write a short comment on this story entitled "Why my mother should NOT read this book".
- Plan a marketing campaign for this book. Who is most likely to read it? Either design an attractive sales poster or write a jacket blurb that will appeal to the likely readers. (Or do both if you wish).
- Present the most important things you learned from reading this book as one of the following: flow-chart, collage, diagram, poster.
- Explain how reading this book would (or would not) help someone interested in this subject as a career.
- Write either an index or a glossary for one chapter.
- Invent a puzzle, an experiment or a research task a teacher could use to test pupils' understanding of this text.

In summary...

Comprehension work is a significant learning tool, of relevance in many more curriculum areas than we sometimes realise. But we need to use less traditional strategies if we are to make it meaningful and productive for gifted learners. The ideas presented here are effective because they all relate back to the natural learning responses of gifted students. As is so often the case with material developed for gifted learners, some can also be used to add more interest for children of more average ability – and undoubtedly they can make life more interesting for the teacher too!

