Questions Before, During, and After Reading

Taken and adapted from

What Is It?

To aid their comprehension, skillful readers ask themselves questions before, during, and after they read. You can help students become more proficient by modeling this process for them and encouraging them to use it when they read independently.

Why Is It Important?

Dolores Durkin’s research in 1979 showed that most teachers asked students questions after they had read, as opposed to questioning to improve comprehension before or while they read. In the late 1990s, further research (Pressley, et al. 1998) revealed that despite the abundance of research supporting questioning before, during, and after reading to help comprehension, teachers still favored post-reading comprehension questions.

Researchers have also found that when adult readers are asked to "think aloud" as they read, they employ a wide variety of comprehension strategies, including asking and answering questions before, during, and after reading (Pressley and Afflerbach 1995). Proficient adult readers:

Are aware of why they are reading the text

Preview and make predictions

Read selectively

Make connections and associations with the text based on what they already know

Refine predictions and expectations

Use context to identify unfamiliar words

Reread and make notes

Evaluate the quality of the text

Review important points in the text

Consider how the information might be used in the future
Successful reading is not simply the mechanical process of "decoding" text. Rather, it is a process of active inquiry. Good readers approach a text with questions and develop new questions as they read, for example:

"What is this story about?"
"What does the main character want?"
"Will she get it?" "If so, how?"

Even after reading, engaged readers still ask questions:

"What is the meaning of what I have read?"
"Why did the author end the paragraph (or chapter, or book) in this way?"
"What was the author's purpose in writing this?"

Good authors anticipate the reader's questions and plant questions in the reader's mind (think of a title such as, Are You My Mother? by P.D. Eastman). In this way, reading becomes a collaboration between the reader and the author. The author's job is to raise questions and then answer them – or provide several possible answers. Readers cooperate by asking the right questions, paying careful attention to the author's answers, and asking questions of their own.

How Can You Make It Happen?

To help readers learn to ask questions before, during, and after reading, think aloud the next time you are reading a book, article, or set of directions. Write each question on a post-it note and stick it on the text you have the question about. You may be surprised at how many typically unspoken questions you ponder, ask, and answer as you read. You may wonder as you read or after you read at the author's choice of title, at a vocabulary word, or about how you will use this information in the future.

You should begin to model these kinds of questions in the primary grades during read-aloud times, when you can say out loud what you are thinking and asking. Read a book or text to the class, and model your thinking and questioning. Emphasize that even though you are an adult reader, questions before, during, and after reading continue to help you gain an understanding of the text you are reading. Ask questions such as:

"What clues does the title give me about the story?"
"Is this a real or imaginary story?"
"Why am I reading this?"
"What do I already know about__?"
"What predictions can I make?"

Pre-select several stopping points within the text to ask and answer reading questions. Stopping points should not be so frequent that they hinder comprehension or fluid reading of a text. This is also an excellent time to model "repair strategies" to correct miscomprehension. Start reading the text, and ask yourself questions while reading:

"What do I understand from what I just read?"
"What is the main idea?"
"What picture is the author painting in my head?"
"Do I need to reread so that I understand?"
Then reread the text, asking the following questions when you are finished:

"Which of my predictions were right? What information from the text tells me that I am correct?"
"What were the main ideas?"
"What connections can I make to the text? How do I feel about it?"
Encourage students to ask their own questions after you have modeled this strategy, and write all their questions on chart paper.

After students become aware of the best times to ask questions during the reading process, be sure to ask them a variety of questions that:

Can be used to gain a deeper understanding of the text

Have answers that might be different for everyone

Have answers that can be found in the text

Clarify the author's intent

Can help clarify meaning

Help them make inferences

Help them make predictions

Help them make connections to other texts or prior knowledge