

CHAPTER THREE

ASSESSING READING COMPREHENSION

This section describes the *Reading and Responding* approach to assessing students' comprehension, and offers a suggested sequence for conducting an assessment. Other options for using the selections are also included.

ASSESSMENT TO INSTRUCTION

The primary purpose of assessment is feedback. It tells you and your students how you are doing and what you need to do next. This is called "assessment *for* learning."

Routinely, teachers collect information to help monitor students' progress and inform teaching. This assessment is an ongoing process, occurring throughout the year, while the learning and teaching are still happening. It is criterion-referenced, based on the prescribed learning outcomes or expectations in the provincial curriculum. Assessment and instruction share the same focus; key aspects are highlighted in both instructional planning and in assessment standards. For example, in Grade 4, a young reader may be working on aspects such as the following:

Understanding and responding to stories

- retells main events in the correct sequence
- describes main characters in some detail
- makes logical inferences (e.g., about characters' feelings)
- makes connections to prior knowledge, experience, or other texts
- offers reactions and opinions with some support
- provides adequate detail and reasoning to support inferences, connections, and opinions

Understanding and responding to information

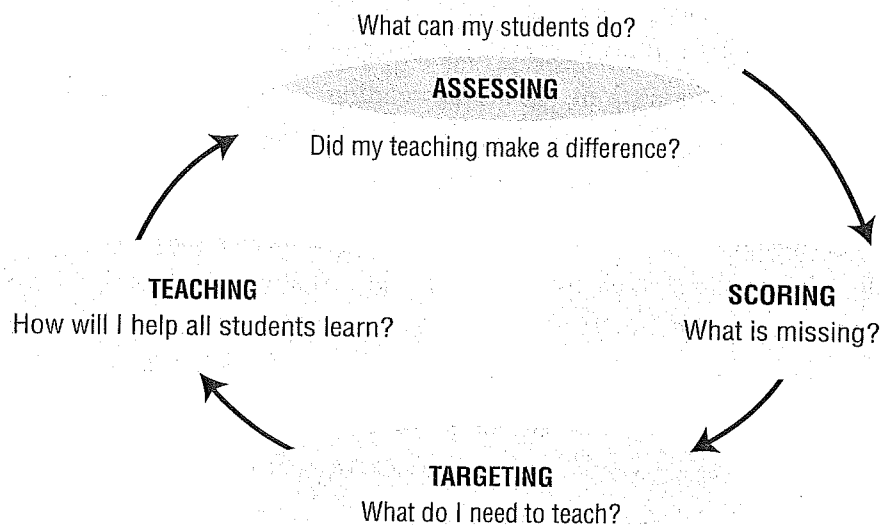
- identifies most of the important ideas
- records information accurately and in some detail
- sorts and organizes information in a reasonable way
- makes some logical inferences (e.g., about cause and effect)
- makes one or more logical connections to prior knowledge, experience, or other texts
- provides adequate and relevant detail and support for inferences, connections, and so on

Understanding and responding to poetry

- accurately identifies the topic or subject of the poem
- describes key images or events with some detail
- makes some logical inferences (e.g., about the poet's feelings or purpose of the poem)
- interprets simple poetic or figurative language (e.g., by using comparisons)
- makes one or more connections to prior knowledge, experience, or other texts
- offers reactions and opinions with some support
- provides adequate detail and information to support interpretations and opinions

Most teachers find it effective to focus on one of these aspects for instruction. After a class assessment, score each student individually, creating a profile of strengths and needs. From the individual profiles, search for patterns within the class—these patterns determine the direction for subsequent class lessons. In the next assessment, expect to see a change in the targeted area, as a result of aligning assessment and instruction. If the change is not as great as you expected, you can choose different instructional strategies, but continue the focus. However, if the change has occurred, you can set a new instructional plan based on a new focus.

The questions that fuel this cyclical process are explained in the diagram below.



You can use descriptive information drawn from the assessment to plan instruction. Because of this link between assessment and instruction, assessment has a profound impact on improving student achievement. You see what your students are able to do and where they need support. You become more explicit in modelling and coaching the specific reading behaviours necessary to improve performance in the targeted area. As you share assessment results with your students, they become involved in setting learning goals, in celebrating their accomplishments, and in working toward explicit learning targets. Working together, you and your students co-create goals and manage the reading progress by continually reflecting and reviewing the assessment and instructional process. This creates powerful learning experiences for students as they see and measure their own comprehension and understanding of text.

GUIDELINES FOR USING THE ASSESSMENT SELECTIONS AND TASKS

→ **Parallel powerful teaching.** In assessing student progress, work to make assessment guide future teaching and learning. Thus, the teacher notes include suggestions for before reading, during reading, and after reading, as well as discussion and conference questions.

In *Before reading*, students make connections with the content, the vocabulary, or the style of the selection, and with setting a purpose for reading. The teaching suggestions set the stage to support all students behaving as effective readers.

In *During reading*, suggestions are given on how to collect additional information on reading strategies with small groups of students, or with those who are considered at-risk readers. Prompts are provided to help you conduct conferences or interviews with students about their reading.

In *After reading*, questions help students think about their reading in terms of content, response, and the strategies they used.

→ **Develop individual and class profiles.** Collect the responses and use the appropriate rubric to assess them (see BLMs 4.5, 5.5, and 6.6). Comprehension keys for each selection are given. Based on individual student responses, decide what will be the class focus. Alternatively, you may choose a different focus for a particular group of students in the class—this is another way to extend student learning. However, be aware that when a different focus is chosen for at-risk students, they may miss the opportunity of repeated practice and reinforcement that is required for them. The result may be that the intended targeted area and the students' program may become disconnected. Therefore, ensure that at-risk students have the most coordinated, focused program possible.

→ **Conference with selected students.** While the students are reading and responding, choose a few students to interview. Some teachers do this while the students are working. Other teachers choose to interview after the reading and responding has been completed. Conference prompts are included with the teacher notes for each selection. These prompts focus on learning more about students' understanding, personal response, and use of strategies.

These suggestions will help students be the best readers they can be and will provide you with information on how students read the selections.

While the tasks provided in each chapter are designed for written responses, you can make adaptations to ensure that all students are able to show their thinking. For example, responses can be completed as an interview, drawn, or tape-recorded.

One-to-one conferences give you a great deal of information about your students. Conferences are worthwhile for all students, and especially for those who know more than they can express on a written page.

→ **Conduct running records.** In some situations, you can conduct quick running records during formal assessment sessions. While students are reading and responding, move from student to student, asking each to read aloud a passage from the text. Record what you notice about the student's reading—on the student's page—and return the page with a compliment. These pages can be collected for future analysis. Over time, you and your students will be able to monitor the changes that are happening in oral reading.

A sample scoring guide is provided on page 44.

→ **Extend the experience.** To integrate the assessment, suggestions have been given to extend and deepen understanding. Once the assessment is completed, invite students to choose one of the options, which are designed to appeal to different styles of learners.

Working over time on a topic helps build comprehension and background knowledge.

OPTIONS FOR USING THE SELECTIONS

→ **Make a plan to assess your students at regular intervals (every six weeks, twice a term).** Use the descriptive rubric to score the responses. Each time the assessment is given, use the same rubric, but highlight the descriptors using a different colour. Keep student responses in a portfolio so they are available for you, your students, and their families to see changes as the school year progresses.

Having all the information collected on one page makes a very visual and easy-to-read growth or progress chart.

→ **Choose a focus: stories, poetry, or information.** Over the next term, choose three selections from within one genre, and assess your students using the descriptive rubric. Focus your lessons according to the class results. Invite students to participate with you in charting their progress in reading and responding within the chosen genre.

→ **Sort the selections into themes or topics connected to the curriculum you are presenting in your class.** Use the selections, regardless of the genre, as they fit within your curriculum.

→ **Use the selections as a teaching tool.** For example, having determined that students need to focus on inferring characters' feelings, choose a new passage and model how you would infer feelings with a think-aloud about how you would respond to the tasks. Invite students to use the descriptive rubric to provide you with feedback on your performance.

→ **Invite students to choose selections that they would like to read and respond to independently.** Students may choose to use the response tasks that are presented, or they may choose to create their own.

ONGOING RECORDS

It is worthwhile for students to create a portfolio or storage folder for their assessments. Regardless of how the collection is organized, the record-keeping for each genre should be kept on a single rubric and scored with different coloured pens for each assessment. This type of record-keeping makes it easy to monitor the changes that are occurring in students' reading and responding. Students enjoy returning to their portfolios and perusing their assessments. They can see a visual record of their growth, set targets, and witness the effects of their practice on their learning.

SCORING STUDENTS' ORAL READING

You can use the following scoring guide to record students' oral reading. The recording is done right on the paragraph from which the student is reading. Be sure to give every student a compliment on his or her oral reading.

omission	home
repetition	home
substitution	house home
insertion	old my house ^
reversal	in/the
doesn't know	DK
self-corrects	✓
sounds out	SO
pause	in the/cottage