

Building Better Mental Models

Comprehension happens when readers build strong mental models.

A mental model is a vivid, organized understanding of *who*, *what*, *where*, *why*, *when*, and *how* a text unfolds. It is much more than finishing a page. It is the meaning a reader continuously constructs as they read—connecting ideas, filling gaps, and deepening understanding with every sentence.

These eight conditions work together to make that possible.

Fluency
AUTOMATICITY

Working memory is small, and whatever attention a reader spends sounding out a word is taken from understanding it. Reading the words automatically is what keeps the stream of ideas connected. It is the first condition: when it is clear you never notice it, and when it is missing you notice nothing else.

Text Coherence
COHESION

Holding a string of sentences together is the text's job, not just the reader's. Cohesive ties, clear transitions, and sound structure let meaning accumulate in order. A well written text doesn't leave you hanging, doesn't overexplain, and doesn't hand you more than you need to feed the model.

Verbal Reasoning
INFERENCE & REASONING

A strong text tells you just enough, but never everything, and what it leaves out is where the reader comes in. Filling gaps with inferences is part of verbal reasoning, and it is much of the work of reading. This is where mental models are built, with the reasoning that connects one part of a text to another.

Knowledge
BACKGROUND

Knowledge is the foundation a mental model grows in, not a reward for reading well. It gives the stated words their substance and quietly supplies the meaning a text leaves unsaid. The more a reader already knows, the less a text has to spell out, and a reader deep in a topic can out-read a stronger reader who is new to it.

Sentences
LANGUAGE STRUCTURE

A reader can know everything a passage is about and still lose the thread of meaning. Sentence structure quietly tells the mind what to hold, what to connect, and what to keep waiting for. Complex sentences carry nuance, while simpler ones ease the load on working memory. Strong writing walks the fine line between them.

Vocabulary
WORDS & WORD PARTS

A word is not a definition but a node in a web of meaning, and many words are built from smaller parts that carry meaning of their own. Know a word deeply, the company it keeps and the pieces it is made from, and you can even unlock words you have never met. Readers build the picture in their heads from the networks of the words they are given.

Motivation
ENGAGEMENT & PURPOSE

Comprehension is effortful, and effort follows motivation. A reader with a real reason to keep going, an interest, a purpose, a question they want answered, spends attention freely and pushes through the hard patches. Motivation is not an extra; it is the engine that keeps understanding moving forward.

Attention
FOCUS & MONITORING

Something has to hold all of it in view at once. The mind has a single spotlight, and these conditions work together only because most of them run automatically. When a reader loses the thread, attention is the first thing to go, the executive function that keeps everything aimed at the same text.

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