



# Comprehension Constructors: Helping Adolescent Learners Develop Reading Strategies

# Comprehension Constructors: Introduction

Comprehension instruction has value and lasting impact when teachers know how to design lessons, activities and materials that match the needs of their students. Prefab worksheets or generic activities and routines often won't work, because students, texts, and tasks are always changing. "Comprehension Constructor" is a term coined by Cris Tovani (Stenhouse, 2000) to describe the graphic organizers she uses to assist adolescent readers as they make sense of texts. Cris tailors these organizers to the needs of students as they emerge, linked to specific reading assignments.

At their simplest level, comprehension constructors are designed to help students make their thinking visible as they read. As Donald Schoen explains, reflection is nothing more than a personal conversation you have with a problem. Constructors help students pause when they encounter a problem comprehending a text, and converse with themselves and the text as they work to solve that problem and make meaning.

The notes on the comprehension constructor can be used by teachers to assess the comprehension of the student, by the student to reflect on their reading and make sense of it, and by the whole class in small groups and discussions to share strategies and understanding.

There are three key questions teachers ask themselves in designing a new constructor:

- What aspects of the assigned reading are likely to challenge my students' understanding of the text?
- How could some notes and reflection help them through these challenges?
- How will the students and I use the constructor after it is completed?

If your students are reading a science textbook and trying to absorb difficult new vocabulary, the constructor you design will likely look quite a bit different than the constructor students complete before participating in literature discussion groups.

The constructors on the following pages are examples, demonstrating how answers to the design focus questions change the look and purpose of the comprehension constructor. They are not meant to be used as templates, but as springboards for thinking about how you might design constructors for your students based on current assignments and needs.

## Reference

Tovani, Cris. (2001). *I Read It, but I Don't Get It*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

# Comprehension Constructors

## Example 1: History Textbook

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Fact

Is this fact important? Explain why.

1.

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2.

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3.

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4.

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5.

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6.

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# Comprehension Constructors

## Example 2: Science Textbook

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Fill all four squares.

<p>p.</p> <p>I wonder:</p>	<p>p.</p> <p>I wonder:</p>
<p>p.</p> <p>I wonder:</p>	<p>p.</p> <p>I wonder:</p>

# Comprehension Constructors

## Example 3: Poem (Preparation for Groups)

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Highlight a place in the poem that is confusing to you, but where you can see a picture in your head.

Try one of two options below, either describing or drawing what you see.

1. Describe the picture, using these beginnings:

It looks....

It smells....

It sounds....

It feels....

OR

2. Draw a picture of what you see here:

How do the words or drawing change your understanding of the poem?

When you share your response in groups, talk about why you chose to use words or pictures in your response.

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## Example 4: Literature

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<p>p.</p> <p>Text highlighted:</p>    <p>I'm confused because.....</p>	<p>p.</p> <p>Text highlighted:</p>    <p>I'm confused because.....</p>
<p>How I might clear up my confusion:</p>          	<p>How I might clear up my confusion:</p>          

# Comprehension Constructors

## Example 5: Op/Ed (or Any Writing That Provokes a Strong Response)

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Observations/Quotes from Text	Reflections and Reactions

Notes: