**Activating Prior Knowledge**

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**What Is It?**

Call it schema, relevant background knowledge, prior knowledge, or just plain experience, when students make connections to the text they are reading, their comprehension increases. Good readers constantly try to make sense out of what they read by seeing how it fits with what they already know. When we help students make those connections before, during, and after they read, we are teaching them a critical comprehension strategy that the best readers use almost unconsciously.

Ellin Oliver Keene and Susan Zimmerman in *Mosaic of Thought* (1997), have identified three main types of connections students make as they read:

* Text to self
* Text to world
* Text to text

**Why Is It Important?**

Explicitly teaching strategies that proficient readers use when trying to make sense out of text helps to deepen understanding and create independent readers. Activating prior knowledge, or schema, is the first of seven strategies that Keene and Zimmerman identify as key for reading comprehension success.

"Teaching children which thinking strategies are used by proficient readers and helping them use those strategies independently creates the core of teaching reading." (Keene and Zimmerman, 1997)

These strategies, identified through research based on what good readers do when they are reading, help students become metacognitive. They learn to think about their thinking as they are reading.

When students learn to make connections from their experience to the text they are currently reading, they have a foundation, or [scaffolding](https://www.teachervision.com/pro-dev/skill-builder/48776.html), upon which they can place new facts, ideas, and concepts. As good readers read, they think about what they are reading and consider how it fits with what they already know. In this way, they build upon the schema that they already have developed.

**When Should It Be Taught?**

This comprehension strategy should be taught on an ongoing basis so that students learn independently to use it as they are reading. It should be taught explicitly and systematically over an extended period of time, moving from modeling the thinking process out loud by the teacher, to students using the strategy as a natural part of their comprehension process.

Prior knowledge should be discussed before reading the text to help set the stage for what is coming. During reading, students should be encouraged to make connections to the text from their experience and the teacher should model this process using his or her own connections. After reading, the discussion should center on how the connections helped students to better understand the text and how the text helped them to build their foundation of prior knowledge.

**What Does It Look Like?**

At the early stages of teaching students the strategy of making connections to their prior knowledge, the teacher models "thinking aloud." The teacher reads a text to the class and talks through his or her thinking process in order to show students how to think about their thinking as they are reading. Slowly, after students have seen and heard the teacher using the strategy, they are given the opportunity to share their experiences and thinking. Finally, students make connections to texts independently. Teachers can check in periodically to have students articulate their thinking, in order to track progress, spot difficulties, and intervene individually or conduct a mini-lesson to reteach or move students forward.

As students are activating their prior knowledge and making connections, they use graphic organizers, such as a [concept map](https://www.teachervision.com/pro-dev/skill-builder/48776.html), a flow chart, or a [KWL chart](https://www.teachervision.com/graphic-organizers/printable/4301.html), to help map their thinking. Often students keep reflection or [response journals](https://www.teachervision.com/writing/letters-and-journals/48544.html) where they record thoughts, feelings, insights, and questions about what they read. Students, in large and small groups, discuss and write about the connections they are making to texts. (For examples of these and other [graphic organizers](https://www.teachervision.com/graphic-organizers/printable/6293.html), click the link.)