I Read It, but I Don't Get It
Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers

Cris Tovani

Teachers of adolescent readers face many challenges. Some students are skilled at decoding text, but have few strategies for understanding complex genres. Others have entered their teen years struggling to decode even the simplest books and articles. Cris Tovani, a high school teacher in Denver, Colorado, shares strategies that work for readers of all abilities in her book I Read It, but I Don't Get It, and videotape series Thoughtful Reading. The book and video series include examples of how to:

- design small-group instruction;
- teach students to work together in groups;
- initiate one-on-one conferences with students;
- teach comprehension strategies to the whole class;
- help students monitor their reading through notes, logs, and discussions;
- create “comprehension constructors” and other instruction tools that link reading, writing, and thinking;
- promote student independence through whole-class discussions and student presentations;
- provide a range of genres to meet the needs of diverse students.

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7. What Do You Wonder?
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**Understanding Strategic Reading**

**Materials Needed**

You will need:
- ✓ Copy of *I Read It, but I Don’t Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers* by Cris Tovani
- ✓ Set of *Thoughtful Reading: Teaching Comprehension to Adolescents* videotapes by Cris Tovani
- ✓ Copy of Whole-Group Discussion Questions (Figure 1) for each participant
- ✓ Copy of Two-Column Notes (Figure 2) for each participant
- ✓ Copy of local newspaper or student newsmagazine for each participant
- ✓ Sticky notes

Participants will need:
- ✓ Copy of *I Read It, but I Don’t Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers* by Cris Tovani

**Whole-Group Discussion**

Distribute the Whole-Group Discussion Questions (Figure 1) and have everyone write their answers silently (5 minutes). Have participants share their personal literary histories with the whole group (10 minutes). You might begin discussion with these questions:

- How does our literary history affect our perceptions of ourselves as readers and writers?
- What do you think is most important in setting up and sustaining a learning community for adolescents?

You might also refer participants to “Important Book and Literary Histories” from *I Read It, but I Don’t Get It* (p. 10).

**Viewing the Video**

Show the introduction, “Figuring Out How to Teach Kids to Read,” from Tape 1, No Magic Formula: Teaching Struggling Readers (cue the beginning of the tape). In this segment, Cris shares her professional background and her guiding principles. Distribute copies of Two-Column Notes (Figure 2) for participants to use while viewing.

**Whole-Group Discussion**

Discuss Cris’s guiding principles: selecting text, modeling, setting a purpose, and holding thinking. You might begin discussion with these questions:
How are Cris’s guiding principles similar to yours? How are your principles different?
How is the organization of Cris’s classroom similar to yours? How do you organize your classroom differently?
What do you notice about the way she talks with her students?

Viewing the Video 10 Minutes

Show “Strategy Instruction: Whole Class, Short Text” from Tape 1, No Magic Formula: Teaching Struggling Readers (cue the tape to 11:11). In this segment, Cris shows a class of struggling readers how to mark text while reading *Time for Kids*. Participants should continue using Two-Column Notes (Figure 2) while viewing.

Newspaper Activity 10 Minutes

Distribute copies of your local newspaper and sticky notes. As an alternative, you might distribute copies of a newsmagazine (i.e., *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Time for Kids*) that includes different text features like sidebars, photos, captions, maps, or graphs. Have participants find a partner. Each team should look through sections of the newspaper for examples of short, accessible text they could use in their teaching. You might highlight examples before participants begin their search, such as letters to the editor, graphs or charts on a weather page, or an article that includes a sidebar. Have participants mark their thinking on sticky notes and place them in the text.
What are the interesting text features? How might you help students notice and use these features? As a whole group, discuss the text features individuals marked. Why did you choose to mark these passages? How might you model your thinking for students with a similar text?

Putting Ideas into Practice 5 Minutes

Ask participants to read Chapter 3, “Purposes for Reading: Access Tools,” from *I Read It, but I Don’t Get It* for more ideas to help students mark thinking in text. Encourage everyone to read the chapter and try at least one new activity involving marking text with students before the next workshop.

Follow-Up Between Workshop Sessions

Two days before the next workshop, put a reminder in participants’ boxes of what they need to bring.

What Participants Need to Bring to the Next Workshop

*I Read It, but I Don’t Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers*
Samples of student work
Goal
In this workshop, participants will see how marking text, literature discussions, double-entry diaries, and think-alouds are integrated in a college-prep reading class to promote deeper comprehension of complex literature.

WORKSHOP 2

Holding Thinking and Identifying Confusion

Materials Needed

You will need:
✓ Copy of *I Read It, but I Don’t Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers* by Cris Tovani
✓ Set of *Thoughtful Reading: Teaching Comprehension to Adolescents* videotapes by Cris Tovani
✓ Copy of Two-Column Notes (Figure 3) for each participant
✓ Copy of Kim’s Sticky Notes (Figure 4) for each participant
✓ Copy of Emily’s *Sunflower* Notes (Figure 5) for each participant
✓ Copy of Double-Entry Diary (Figure 6) for each participant
✓ Sticky notes and highlighters

Participants will need:
✓ Copy of *I Read It, but I Don’t Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers* by Cris Tovani
✓ Sample student work

Small-Group Discussion 10 Minutes

Begin by giving participants an opportunity to talk about questions raised while reading Chapter 3, “Purposes for Reading: Access Tools,” from *I Read It, but I Don’t Get It*. You might begin discussion with these questions:

What have you been thinking about since the last session?
What idea/strategy did you implement as a result of the last session?
What worked well? What would you do differently next time?

Viewing the Video 15 Minutes

Show “The Sunflower: Constructing Meaning from Difficult Text” from Tape 2, Beyond the Game of School: College-Bound Seniors (cue the tape to 04:54). In this segment, Cris models strategies to help college-bound seniors hold their thinking and identify confusion as they read the text, *The Sunflower*. Distribute copies of Two-Column Notes (Figure 3) for use while viewing.

Whole-Group Discussion 15 Minutes

As a whole group, discuss the video excerpt using participants’ notes. You can also distribute copies of Kim’s Sticky Notes and Emily’s *Sunflower* Notes (Figures 4 and 5), sample work completed by students in the video. You might begin discussion with these questions:
What connections are you making to your own classroom? What might you try? What might keep you from making changes in your classroom?

What reading/writing connections occur while students study The Sunflower?

Reading the Excerpt 15 Minutes

Ask participants to read “How Do I Know I’m Stuck” and “Now That I Know I’m Stuck What Do I Do?” (pp. 37–42) from I Read It, but I Don’t Get It (10 minutes). This excerpt provides explicit strategies to help students identify what they don’t understand while reading. Have participants try filling out a Double-Entry Diary (Figure 6) to hold their thinking as they read, and to test one of the tools they have just seen used on the video. Briefly discuss the reading.

Putting Ideas into Practice 5 Minutes

Ask participants to read Chapter 4, “Conversations with Cantos: Tracking Confusion to Its Source,” from I Read It, but I Don’t Get It before the next workshop. Give everyone a few minutes to skim the reading. Participants should also be encouraged to try out one new activity of their choice with students, and bring samples of student work to share at the next workshop.

Follow-Up Between Workshop Sessions

Two days before the next workshop, put a reminder in participants’ boxes of what they need to bring.

What Participants Need to Bring to the Next Workshop

I Read It, but I Don’t Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers

Samples of student work
WORKSHOP 3

Goal

In this workshop, participants will consider the importance of group work in strategy instruction. They will view a video excerpt on group instruction, and talk about the challenges of leading groups in their classrooms.

Accessing Thinking

Materials Needed

You will need:

✓ Copy of *I Read It, but I Don’t Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers* by Cris Tovani
✓ Set of *Thoughtful Reading: Teaching Comprehension to Adolescents* videotapes by Cris Tovani
✓ Copy of Double-Entry Diary (Figure 6) for each participant
✓ Copy of Two-Column Notes (Figure 7) for each participant
✓ Copy of Group Norms (Figure 8) for each participant
✓ Sticky notes and highlighters

Participants will need:

✓ Copy of *I Read It, but I Don’t Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers* by Cris Tovani

Whole-Group Discussion 15 Minutes

Begin with an opportunity for participants to share reactions to the reading and their insights from the activity they tried with students. You might also break into groups of three or four to discuss student samples and classroom experiences.

Viewing the Video 15 Minutes

Show “Small-Group Instruction: Go Ask Alice” from Tape 3, Engaging Students: Choice, Respect, and Talk (cue the tape to 05:06). In this segment, Cris works with a small group of students who are reading the same book. Distribute copies of Two-Column Notes (Figure 7) for use while viewing.

Whole-Group Discussion 10 minutes

As a whole group, discuss what you viewed. Distribute copies of Group Norms (Figure 8). You might begin discussion with these questions:

What do you notice about the way Cris works with students in groups?
How does Cris use wait time?
What seems to be Cris’s goal with this group?

Reading the Excerpt 15 Minutes

Have participants reread pages 32–34 of Chapter 3, “Purposes for Reading: Access Tools,” from *I Read It, but I Don’t Get It* (5 minutes). This excerpt
provides tips on using and designing comprehension constructors. Encourage participants to practice tracking the text as they read. Participants might mark the text with highlighters, sticky notes, or by using a Double-Entry Diary (Figure 6). Have a brief whole-group discussion of the different ways everyone chose to mark the text.

**Putting Ideas into Practice 5 Minutes**

Encourage participants to read Chapter 5, “Fix It!” from *I Read It, but I Don’t Get It* before the next workshop. Provide a few minutes for everyone to skim the chapter. This chapter discusses fix-up strategies to help students make sense of text they are struggling to understand. Ask everyone to try one new strategy or activity with students. In addition, they will need to bring a text (i.e., literature, textbook, poetry, newsmagazine) they are currently using with students.

**Follow-Up Between Workshop Sessions**

Two days before the next workshop, put a reminder in participants’ boxes of what they need to bring.

**What Participants Need to Bring to the Next Workshop**

*I Read It, but I Don’t Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers*

Samples of student work

A piece of text currently being used in the classroom (i.e., literature, textbook, poetry, newsmagazine)
Designing Comprehension Constructors

Materials Needed

You will need:
✓ Copy of *I Read It, but I Don’t Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers* by Cris Tovani
✓ Set of *Thoughtful Reading: Teaching Comprehension to Adolescents* videotapes by Cris Tovani
✓ Copy of Two-Column Notes (Figure 3) for each participant
✓ Copy of Letters to the Editor (Figure 9) for each participant
✓ Copy of Comprehension Constructor (Figure 10) for each participant
✓ Copy of Final Reflection (Figure 11) for each participant

Participants will need:
✓ Copy of *I Read It, but I Don’t Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers* by Cris Tovani
✓ Samples of student work
✓ A piece of text currently being used in the classroom

Small-Group Discussion 15 Minutes

Begin by asking everyone about changes in their practice since the last workshop session, the reading from *I Read It, but I Don’t Get It*, and student samples.

Viewing the Video 10 Minutes

Show the “Comprehension Constructors” and “Assessment” segments from Tape 4, *Making Thinking Visible: Comprehension Tools* (cue the tape to 13:03). In these segments, Cris models using comprehension constructors and talks about assessment. A comprehension constructor is an access tool to help students self-monitor and increase understanding of what they are reading. Distribute copies of Two-Column Notes (Figure 3) for use while viewing.

Whole-Group Discussion 10 Minutes

Discuss what you viewed. You might begin discussion with these questions:

What are the benefits of comprehension constructors?
What are the potential pitfalls of using them?
Putting Ideas into Practice 15 minutes

Distribute the Letters to the Editor (Figure 9). Silently or in groups, have participants note how they might design a comprehension constructor for their students based on their reading of these letters. Next, distribute copies of the Comprehension Constructor (Figure 10) Cris designed for these letters. What are the similarities and differences between the constructor Cris designed and your design ideas? If time permits, talk about possible comprehension constructors you might design to use with the text you brought from your own classroom.

Final Reflection 10 Minutes

Distribute the Final Reflection (Figure 11) and have everyone write their answers silently (5 minutes). Then, discuss the next steps for individuals and the group.

Follow-Up Sessions

If you have time for more than four sessions, you might watch other segments from the video series, Thoughtful Reading, and read additional chapters on comprehension strategies from I Read It, but I Don’t Get It. Some teachers may like to view the tapes individually or in small groups, and then share their learning with others informally. It might be helpful to establish a plan for loaning tapes to participants after the workshops are completed. You can find additional workshop suggestions in the Thoughtful Reading Viewing Guide (www.stenhouse.com/pdfs/0369guid.pdf) available on our Web site, www.stenhouse.com.
Take a moment to jot down answers to these questions before we discuss them as a group.

1. Think about your history as a reader and writer. What positive and negative experiences come to mind?

2. What do you think is essential for building a learning community among adolescents?

3. How would you describe a “struggling” reader? What types of texts do you struggle with as a reader?

4. What is your greatest challenge in teaching reading?
**Figure 2**

**Two-Column Notes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similarities to My Classroom</th>
<th>Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What I’d Like to Try in My Classroom</td>
<td>What Might Keep Me from Making the Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3

**Two-Column Notes**
Figure 4

Kim’s Sticky Notes

- Of all the Jewish men, why was Simon chosen to come & talk to the Nazi? pg 28
- Did he ever think that about the kids he killed everyday? pg 31
- Too soon to die.
- Does he really think that he was worthy of his parents trust? pg 32
- What purpose does the light of Shadow have to the story? pg 36
- What is the coup de grace? pg 38
- The ultimate
- What is the importance of the story of Eliahu & the book? pg 44
- What did the Jews have to do with the Russian T-40? pg 46
- Poor Peter! I feel no sympathy. pg 50
- I feel no sympathy.
- Why did some Jews get food while others weren't purposely starved? pg 40
- How could a community be so sick as to laugh at murder & pain? pg 57
- Why did some Jews get food while others didn't & what were the Nazi's intentions? pg 54
**Emily’s Sunflower Notes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quote and page number</th>
<th>Connection (This reminds me of…) or Question (I wonder…) or Confusion (I don’t understand…)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. pg. 95 Second paragraph from bottom will we ever be able to prevent the creation of mass murderers?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. pg. 97-98 Last paragraph cont. to pg. 98 alone takes care of but forgiveness... only father qualified to make the decision.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. pg. 79 Four of us had to sleep in a single bunk…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. pg. 83 2nd to last paragraph for me there was no home to return to… I couldn’t start it in a cemetery…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. pg. 84 3rd paragraph As I looked around I suddenly saw a bush and behind this bush a sunflower…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reminds me of “A Beautiful Life”

Reminds me of Bambi when everything turns winter and cold. His life was probably like that.

Reminds me of Wizard of Oz when she reaches the poppy field. When Simon saw the field of sunflowers he had a reaction just like Dorothy.

This would be a good time to share with your group.

I wonder if there is a connection.

**Figure 5**
**Double-Entry Diary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Direct Quote and Page Number</th>
<th>I Wonder . . .</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>4.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>5.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What I See</td>
<td>What It Makes Me Think About</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Figure 7: Two-Column Notes

- What I See
- What It Makes Me Think About
Figure 8

Group Norms

Problem: I hate being in a group without my friends. I hate being in a group with people I don’t like.
Solution: If I am in a group that doesn’t work for me, I will tough it out and request a different group next time.

Problem: I don’t like being in a group when some people slack off and don’t do their share of the work. I don’t like it when some people talk all the time and don’t get their work done.
Solution: I recognize that I can’t force anyone but myself to do something and I will agree to do my part.

Problem: I don’t like being in a group when I don’t know what to do and no one will help me.
Solution: I will help members of my group if I can. If I am the one who is stuck, I will ask my group members to help me first and if that isn’t enough, I’ll ask my teacher.

Why do we ask students to discuss?

Discussion
Stimulates higher levels of thinking
Develops social skills
Develops listening skills
Encourages articulation of thinking
Honors all learners
Holds kids accountable
Helps students remember
Allows students to make connections
Allows others to see different perspectives
Promotes deeper understanding
Letters to the Editor

America’s main intention in Iraq is self-preservation. U.S. taxpayers do not want to spend their hard-earned money on nation building. What we want and are entitled to is to go to sleep at night knowing that our children will not be wiped off the face of the earth by some maniac. Maybe we will fail in our nation building in Iraq, but at least we will eliminate one of our greatest threats. We hope the next Iraqi leader will be human. Let’s roll the dice.

Dan Dillulio
Stamford, Conn.

If the goal of war against Iraq is to eliminate the threat of weapons of mass destruction [Iraq: Weapons Inspections, Sept. 30], why not act against other nations that have them? If the goal is the liberation of the Iraqi people, then why aren’t those who want war speaking up for other oppressed peoples of the world? The main U.S. objective is to install a friendly, puppet-like regime (probably not a democratic one, considering Iraq’s past) that will greatly lessen U.S. dependence on Saudi oil and allow the U.S. to pressure Riyadh on its record of exporting terrorists.

Gorm Bjorhovde
Tromso, Norway

Figure 10

Comprehension Constructor

Name: ________________________________________________

Purpose: Comparing your opinion to the opinions of others.

Below are two letters to the editor. The people who wrote these letters have stated their opinions about the impending war with Iraq and have explained why they think the way they do. Do you think that the United States should attack Iraq?

In my opinion the United States ________________________________
because ____________________________________________________

Read the letters below. Do the authors agree or disagree with you?

America’s main intention in Iraq is self-preservation. U.S. taxpayers do not want to spend their hard-earned money on nation building. What we want and are entitled to is to go to sleep at night knowing that our children will not be wiped off the face of the earth by some maniac. Maybe we will fail in our nation building in Iraq, but at least we will eliminate one of our greatest threats. We hope the next Iraqi leader will be human. Let’s roll the dice.

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Gorm Bjorhovde
Tromso, Norway

Thinking:

Figure 11

Final Reflection

How has your thinking about reading instruction changed after completing these workshops?

What might you try in your classroom as a result of participating in this study group?

What do you plan to do next to learn more about teaching reading comprehension?

What additional professional support do you need to implement what you’ve learned in your classroom?
Time Cues for Thoughtful Reading

Tape 1: No Magic Formula: Teaching Struggling Readers (25:34)
00:00–08:39  “Figuring out how to teach kids to read.” (08:39)
03:26–04:49  First Hour: College Prep English (01:23)
04:50–07:18  Second and Third Hour: Reading Workshop (02:28)
07:19–08:39  Cris’s Four Principles (01:20)
08:40–25:34  Second and Third Hour: Reading Workshop (16:56)
09:23–11:10  Strategy Instruction: Getting Started (01:23)
11:11–18:03  Strategy Instruction: Whole Class, Short Text (06:52)
18:04–21:28  Individual Conferences (03:24)
21:29–24:14  “You’re smarter today than you were yesterday.” (02:45)
24:15–25:34  “What did you do to figure it out?” (01:19)

Tape 2: Beyond the Game of School: College-Bound Seniors (23:41)
00:00–03:13  First Hour: College Prep English (03:13)
03:14–04:53  Strategy Instruction: Slowing Down (01:39)
04:54–20:20  The Sunflower: Constructing Meaning from Difficult Text (15:26)
08:26–11:24  Organizing Thinking (02:58)
11:25–16:38  Strategy Instruction: Think-Aloud (05:13)
16:39–19:58  Strategy Instruction: Reading-Writing Connection (03:19)
19:59–22:28  Reading Response Logs (02:29)
22:29–23:41  “It isn’t just a game.” (01:12)

Tape 3: Engaging Students: Choice, Respect, and Talk (23:22)
00:00–03:25  Establishing a Climate of Respect (03:25)
03:26–05:05  “Selfish Reading” (01:39)
05:06–20:13  Small-Group Instruction: Go Ask Alice (15:07)
20:14–22:20  Calendars (02:06)

Tape 4: Making Thinking Visible: Comprehension Tools (24:51)
00:00–13:02  “Show me your thinking.” (13:02)
02:26–03:49  Second and Third Hour: Reading Workshop (01:23)
03:50–13:02  Small-Group Instruction (14:12)
13:03–18:32  Comprehension Constructors (05:29)
18:33–21:04  Highlighting Kids’ Work (02:31)
21:05–23:32  Assessment (02:27)
23:33–24:51  “What I’m doing can be replicated.” (01:18)