Reading with Meaning
Teaching Comprehension in the Primary Grades

Debbie Miller

If you have ever wondered how to teach comprehension strategies to primary-age children, read on.

First, imagine a primary-age classroom where all the children are engaged and motivated; where the buzz of excited, emerging readers fills the air; where simultaneously words are sounded out and connections are made between the books of their choice and the experiences of their lives.

Welcome to Debbie Miller’s real classroom where real students are learning to love to read, write, and are creating a collaborative and caring environment together. Debbie’s book Reading with Meaning and her video series Happy Reading! focus on how best to teach children strategies for comprehending text. Debbie leads the reader through the course of a year showing how her students learn to become thoughtful, independent, and strategic readers. Through explicit instruction, modeling, classroom discussion, and most important, by gradually releasing responsibility to her students, Debbie provides a model for creating a climate and culture of thinking and learning.

Debbie’s work shows us how to bring our imagined classroom to life. You will emerge with new tools for teaching comprehension strategies and a firm appreciation that a rigorous classroom can also be nurturing and fun.

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Creating and Sustaining a Learning Community

Materials Needed

You will need:

✓ Copy of *Reading with Meaning: Teaching Comprehension in the Primary Grades* by Debbie Miller
✓ Set of *Happy Reading! Creating a Predictable Structure for Joyful Teaching and Learning* videotapes by Debbie Miller
✓ Copy of Small-Group Discussion Questions (Figure 1) for each participant
✓ Copy of Two-Column Notes (Figures 2 and 3) for each participant

Participants will need:

✓ Copy of *Reading with Meaning: Teaching Comprehension in the Primary Grades* by Debbie Miller

Small-Group Discussion (15 minutes)

Distribute the Small-Group Discussion Questions (Figure 1) and have everyone write their answers silently (5 minutes). Break into groups of three or four and discuss the essential components of setting up and sustaining a learning community.

Viewing the Video (15 minutes)

Show Part 1 of Tape 1: Essentials: Tone, Structure, and Routines for Creating and Sustaining a Learning Community (cue the tape to 02:17). Debbie shares her classroom design and routines in this part. As participants view the video, have them focus on the classroom environment. Distribute copies of Two-Column Notes (Figure 2) and ask participants to note the similarities and differences to their classroom while viewing the segment.

Whole-Group Discussion (10 minutes)

As a group, discuss how the organization of Debbie’s classroom is similar or different to how participants organize their classrooms. You might ask these questions:

What do find to be unusual about her classroom?
What do you notice about the way she talks with children?
What do you notice about Debbie’s role as the teacher?
Viewing the Video 15 minutes

Continue viewing the video beginning at “Readers’ Workshop” and ending with “Eye-to-Eye, Knee-to-Knee” from Tape 1: Essentials: Tone, Structure, and Routines for Creating and Sustaining a Learning Community (cue the tape to 14:45). Participants are to continue taking two-column notes of the similarities and differences to their classrooms. These segments focus on theme and encouraging students to support their thinking with evidence from the text.

Putting Ideas into Practice 5 minutes

Ask participants to read Chapters 1 and 2 from Reading with Meaning before the next workshop session. Have participants keep Two-Column Notes (Figure 3) of what they would like to try and what might keep them from making a change in their classrooms while reading the text. Encourage everyone to try out one new idea and be ready to share the experience at the next workshop. Also, encourage participants to bring samples of student work.

Possible ideas to try: eye-to-eye, knee-to-knee management strategy; finding evidence in text to support thinking; or, implementing a new classroom routine.

Follow-Up Between Workshop Sessions

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

What Participants Need to Bring to the Next Workshop

Reading with Meaning: Teaching Comprehension in the Primary Grades
Completed Two-Column Notes (Figure 3)
 Explicit Teaching: Portraits from Readers’ Workshop

**Materials Needed**

You will need:

✓ Copy of *Reading with Meaning: Teaching Comprehension in the Primary Grades* by Debbie Miller
✓ Set of *Happy Reading! Creating a Predictable Structure for Joyful Teaching and Learning* videotapes by Debbie Miller
✓ Copy of Two-Column Notes (Figure 3) for each participant
✓ Copy of Small-Group Discussion Questions (Figure 4) for each participant
✓ Copy of Whole-Group Guide Sheet for Themes (Figure 5) for each participant
✓ Copy of Tricky Word Card (Figure 6) for each participant
✓ Copy of Assessment Note Sample (Figure 7) for each participant

Participants will need:

✓ Copy of *Reading with Meaning: Teaching Comprehension in the Primary Grades* by Debbie Miller
✓ Completed Two-Column Notes (Figure 3)

**Small-Group Discussion**

15 minutes

Distribute the Small-Group Discussion Questions (Figure 4) and have everyone write their answers silently (5 minutes). Break into groups of three or four to discuss and share new learning.

**Viewing the Video**

12 minutes

Show the video segments beginning at “Small-Group Decoding” and ending with “At the End of the Day” from Tape 2: Explicit Instruction: Portraits from Readers’ Workshop (cue the tape to 11:09). This range of segments presents many examples of Debbie at work with children, including individual, small-group, and whole-group instruction. Viewers will see how instruction builds from day-to-day, based on observations and assessment of students’ needs. Distribute copies of Two-Column Notes (Figure 3) and ask participants to note what they would like to try and what might keep them from making a change in their classrooms while viewing the segment.

**Whole-Group Discussion**

15 minutes

As a whole group, discuss what you viewed. How do you balance individual, small-group, and whole-group instruction in your classroom? What do you observe about Debbie’s informal assessment techniques?
Reading the Excerpt 10 minutes

Have participants read “Thinking Aloud: Showing Kids How” (pp. 54–57) from Reading with Meaning. This strategy helps students become more aware of their inner conversation as they read.

Putting Ideas into Practice 10 minutes

Distribute copies of the Whole-Group Guide Sheet for Themes (Figure 5) and the Tricky Word Card (Figure 6). Ask everyone to think about how they could design comprehension aids like these for use with the whole class, in small groups, or with individuals based on the needs they find in their assessment notes. Participants can find additional examples of comprehension aids on pages 70 (schema), 81 (visualizing), 114 (inferring), 132 (questioning), and 161 (synthesizing) of Reading with Meaning. Distribute copies of Debbie’s Assessment Note Sample (Figure 7) as a guide for participants’ assessment notes.

Ask participants to read Chapter 5, “Schema,” from Reading with Meaning for the next session. Participants are encouraged to try out one new idea and bring samples of student work to share at the next workshop.

Possible ideas to try: Tricky Word Card, a think-aloud, a new comprehension aid, or a new informal assessment technique.

Follow-Up Between Workshop Sessions

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

What Participants Need to Bring to the Next Workshop

Reading with Meaning: Teaching Comprehension in the Primary Grades
Teaching Nonfiction

Materials Needed

You will need:
✓ Copy of Reading with Meaning: Teaching Comprehension in the Primary Grades by Debbie Miller
✓ Set of Happy Reading! Creating a Predictable Structure for Joyful Teaching and Learning videotapes by Debbie Miller
✓ Copy of Two-Column Notes (Figure 3) for each participant
✓ Copy of Small-Group Discussion Questions (Figure 4) for each participant
✓ Copy of Final Reflection form (Figure 8) for each participant

Participants will need:
✓ Copy of Reading with Meaning: Teaching Comprehension in the Primary Grades by Debbie Miller

Small-Group Discussion 15 minutes

Distribute the Small-Group Discussion Questions (Figure 4) and have everyone write their answers silently (5 minutes). Break into groups of three or four to discuss and share new learning.

Viewing the Video 21 minutes

Show Part 2, “Teaching Nonfiction,” from Tape 3: Wise Choices: Independence and Instruction in Book Choice (cue the tape to 16:20). This part shows Debbie teaching students the conventions of nonfiction text. She helps students determine important information when reading nonfiction. Participants will see Debbie’s nonfiction convention notebooks in action. Distribute copies of Two-Column Notes (Figure 3) and ask participants to make note of what they would like to try and what might keep them from making a change in their classrooms while viewing the video.

Whole-Group Discussion 15 minutes

As a whole group, discuss what you viewed. Discussion starters may include the following questions:

What connections does Debbie make between reading and writing nonfiction?
What are her strategies for teaching different conventions?
How else could convention notebooks be used to support instruction?
Reading the Excerpt 10 minutes

Ask participants to read pages 148–154 of *Reading with Meaning* about the specific uses of convention notebooks in Debbie’s classroom.

Final Reflection 10 minutes

Distribute the Final Reflection form (Figure 8) and ask everyone to write their answers silently (5 minutes). This is an opportunity for participants to reflect and share new learning with each other.

Putting Ideas into Practice

Participants are encouraged to read Chapter 10, “Determining Importance in Nonfiction” from *Reading with Meaning*. Remind participants that the book is a great resource as they try out new reading comprehension strategies in their classrooms.

Follow-Up Sessions

If you have time for more than three sessions, you might try the workshop suggestions in the *Happy Reading!* Viewing Guide (www.stenhouse.com/pdfs/0357guid.pdf), or create your own combination of segments and excerpts to view, read, and discuss. Some may prefer to view the tapes and read excerpts from the book individually, or in small groups, and then share their learning with others. This would be particularly helpful if teachers have sufficient time to try one new idea at a time.
Figure 1

Small-Group Discussion Questions

1. What do you see as the essential components for building a learning community?

2. How do tone, structure, and routine fit within your learning community?

3. How do you create a climate and culture for thinking?

4. What strategies do you use to build relationships with your students?

5. What do you love about teaching?
### Figure 2

**Two-Column Notes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similarities to My Classroom</th>
<th>Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Figure 3**

Two-Column Notes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What I’d Like to Try in My Classroom</th>
<th>What Might Keep Me from Making the Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 4

Small-Group Discussion Questions

1. What idea/strategy did you implement as a result of the last workshop?

2. What worked well?

3. What are the challenges that you still face in the implementation of this idea/strategy?
Figure 5

**Whole-Group Guide Sheet for Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Book Title</th>
<th>Important Ideas, Themes</th>
<th>Evidence in the Text That Supports My Thinking . . .</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What do you do when you come to a word you don’t know?

- Look at the picture.
  - Think about the story.
- Go back.
- Get your mouth ready.
  - Point and slide under the word.
- Read to the end of the sentence.
- Try a word.
  - Does it make sense?
  - Does it sound like language?
  - Do the letters match?
- Go on.
Ben shares his learning during share time. I write it to remember and post in the room.

From observations and conferences—need to pull them together in small, needs-based group.

Wondering about Bryn, Lacey, Tucker, and Bryce—note to myself to confer with them the next day about book selection—maybe bring them together briefly to share.

Planning how I might use poetry to help kids connect schema/text to make inferences/understand.

During share Madi says, “Images from reading find their way...” Wrote it because I wanted to remember to talk with her about it—with her book and writer’s notebook in front of her.

Just a reminder to get with them during work activity to talk with them about how they will present the next day’s mini-lesson. Materials, text, etc.

A reminder to get these books for the kids.

Conferences coming up—start getting ready!
Final Reflection

1. What might you try in your classroom as a result of participating in these workshops?

2. What are some obstacles to making these changes in your classroom?

3. What is the most positive experience you have had while participating in these workshops?
Time Cues for *Happy Reading!*

**Tape 1: Essentials: Tone, Structure, and Routines for Creating and Sustaining a Learning Community (38:30)**

02:17–14:44  **Part 1: Getting Started (12:27)**
02:41–03:56  Predictable Structure (01:15)
03:57–06:39  Accessibility and Purpose: Creating an Organized Environment (02:42)
06:40–07:15  The Day Begins (00:35)
07:16–10:45  Music in the Classroom (03:29)
10:46–12:38  Attendance (01:52)
12:39–14:44  Message Board (02:05)

14:45–38:30  **Part 2: Readers’ Workshop (23:45)**
17:41–25:02  Mini-Lesson: Identifying Themes (07:21)
25:03–28:04  Eye-to-Eye, Knee-to-Knee (03:01)
28:05–30:10  Time to Practice (02:05)
30:11–35:29  Sharing (05:18)
35:30–38:30  At the End of the Day (03:00)

**Tape 2: Explicit Instruction: Portraits from Readers’ Workshop (24:00)**

01:29–03:11  Morning Preparation (01:42)
03:12–04:34  Another Day Begins (01:22)

**Readers’ Workshop**

04:35–07:47  Mini-Lesson: Identifying Themes (03:12)
07:48–08:36  Sound Patterns (00:48)
08:37–11:08  Time to Practice (02:31)
11:09–16:12  Small-Group Decoding (05:03)
16:13–18:15  Classroom Management (02:02)
18:16–22:00  Sharing (01:44)
22:01–24:00  At the End of the Day (01:59)

**Tape 3: “Wise Choices”: Independence and Instruction in Book Choice (37:08)**

00:58–16:19  **Part 1: Book Selection (15:17)**

**Readers’ Workshop**

02:32–07:08  Mini-Lesson: Book Selection (04:36)
07:09–08:44  Time to Practice (01:35)
08:45–10:52  Recommending Books (02:07)
10:53–16:19  Sharing (05:26)

16:20–37:10  **Part 2: Teaching Nonfiction (20:50)**

**Readers’ Workshop**

18:00–25:54  Mini-Lesson: Nonfiction (07:54)
25:55–29:17  Time to Practice (03:22)

**Readers’ Workshop**

29:18–32:13  Mini-Lesson: Nonfiction Conventions: Labels (02:55)
32:14–33:11  Time to Practice (00:57)
33:12–35:20  Sharing (02:08)
35:21–37:08  At the End of the Day (01:47)