

Prior knowledge

1A – Check prior knowledge and vocabulary necessary to access the text

In order to read successfully, one of the many things pupils need to do is draw upon their existing knowledge in order to comprehend the text. This could be knowledge of specific vocabulary, ideas or ways of thinking in the subject. As pupils progress through the curriculum, the reading they encounter will often build upon knowledge from previously taught units.

Before reading, teachers should design activities to check and activate the prior knowledge that is necessary to access the text. This could be through retrieval questions in a Do Now, multiple-choice questions, or short discussion tasks.

References

¹ *Improving Literacy in Secondary Schools Guidance Report, EEF, 2021*

Prior knowledge

Activating prior knowledge is one of the five strategies recommended by the EEF to develop pupils as strategic readers¹. This aims to bring the knowledge into pupils' recent memory for use during reading, helping them to infer and elaborate, fill in missing information and build a fuller mental model of what they are reading.

In checking this prior knowledge before reading, teachers can respond by filling in gaps, re-teaching key concepts, and increasing the likelihood that their pupils will be able to successfully read the chosen text.



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Example 1: Science

In Science, a Year 8 class are reading a text about Symbol Equations. In order to understand the explanation in the text, pupils have to know the terms *reactants* and *products*, which they have learned in Year 7. The teacher recaps these through the Do Now quiz before the reading, asking pupils to select the correct definitions of these words. The words are then re-taught if necessary.

Example 2: History

In History, a Year 8 class are reading a text in their unit on the Holocaust. The teacher knows that they will need to understand the word prejudice in order to successfully comprehend the article. She first asks pupils for a simple definition, before looking at scenario-based examples and non-examples, checking understanding using a whiteboard activity. As well as checking understanding, this activity also allows pupils to secure and deepen their knowledge, ready for reading.



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Sometimes the prior knowledge needed to read a text successfully is more than just vocabulary.

Example 3: Science

In Science, when reading a text about rates of photosynthesis, the teacher knows that pupils will need to be able to interpret graphs in order to fully understand the text.

The teacher asks questions in the Do Now that ask pupils to describe what a graph shows. In doing this, she can assess whether pupils understand how to interpret a graph, and what the different axes and variables show.

Example 4: History

Sometimes we want our pupils to be able to read in specific ways, and engage in specific thinking processes, depending on the discipline or task. In GCSE History, one of the key skills pupils must practice is the evaluation of sources. This involves pupils questioning both the accuracy and provenance of the source.

Pupils are looking at a source on Jack the Ripper. The teacher knows that in order to effectively evaluate this source, pupils must use their existing knowledge of the Victorian era and relevant social issues affecting London at the time. She checks this through a quiz before reading, asking questions such as *'In what year did the Jack the Ripper murders take place?'* and *'Briefly describe common attitudes towards the police at the end of the 19th century in London.'*

As with the vocabulary examples, the teacher can intervene before reading if there are gaps in pupil knowledge, and also knows that the information has been recently called into pupils' minds use during the reading.

