Tap into what your child knows

Everything your youngster does, sees, or reads gets filed away in his memory as background knowledge. Here are ways to help him use and build on this information to understand what he reads.

**Jog his memory**
Before you read, ask your child what he knows about the book’s topic. This gets his brain ready to take in new information. For a nonfiction book on bees, he may say the insects buzz and sometimes sting. Idea: Suggest that he draw bees on a sheet of paper and write and illustrate a fact on each bee. After you read, he can add more bees with things he learned.

**Pair outings with books**
A trip to a craft store or the dentist can fill your youngster’s tank of knowledge. Read library books related to upcoming outings, and discuss what you might see (pottery, hygienist). When you get home, reread the book. It may be more meaningful now that he has real-life experience. (“That’s right, the hygienist cleans your teeth before the dentist checks them.”)

**I know that!**
Help your child draw a stop sign on paper, cut it out, and glue it on a craft stick. Keep the sign nearby when you read. Each time he hears something familiar, he can hold up the stop sign. Stop reading to let him share what he knows. (“We have a pet hermit crab at school. When he outgrows his shell, he crawls into a new one.”)

**According to this expert...**

Let your child teach you something. By writing instructions for you, she will share her expertise and practice informational writing.

First, she could choose something she’s good at, such as making s’mores or drawing animals. Have her list each step in the process. Her first step might be “For each s’more, get 2 graham crackers, 1 square of chocolate, and 1 marshmallow.”

Now follow your youngster’s instructions exactly. Can you complete the task? If not, ask her what’s missing. (“Oops, you need to toast the marshmallow before you put it between the graham crackers.”)
Thanksgiving poetry

Everyone's a poet with these family writing activities that will make Thanksgiving even more special!

Rhyming menu. What's for Thanksgiving dinner? Help your child write the name of each food (turkey, green beans, sweet potatoes) on a separate slip of paper. After she puts the slips in a bowl, have each family member draw one and write two rhyming lines of poetry about the food. For instance, “Mashed potatoes are so creamy. With Mom’s gravy, they’re just dreamy.” Now she can combine everyone’s lines into one poem and make a copy to put beside each guest’s plate.

List of thanks. Let your youngster hand out index cards and ask guests to write what they’re thankful for. Then, your child can collect the cards and write a list poem — by listing the ideas and adding descriptive words. Invite her to read it to everyone before you eat. Example:

We’re thankful for
Loving family
Yummy food
Good health
Cute pets
That’s what we’re thankful for!

Q&A Too easy?

Q My son’s teacher sometimes sends home books that seem too easy for him. Why is this?

A The books your child brings home are probably at his independent reading level — easy enough for him to read all by himself without getting frustrated.

It’s likely that he reads more challenging books at school. Those books, at his instructional reading level, are ones he can read and understand with a little help from his teacher.

Also, keep in mind that reading involves more than just recognizing words. Your son needs books that build comprehension skills, too. For example, say he’s learning to infer, or read between the lines. The teacher might assign a book that appears easy but actually requires deeper thinking to really get the meaning.

If you still have concerns, talk to the teacher. She’ll be able to explain your son’s reading level and how she decides which books to send home.

Parent to Parent

Books for life’s lessons

My daughter Sophia was jealous of her new baby brother from the day we came home from the hospital. When I talked to our pediatrician, he recommended several books to read to her, including The New Baby by Mercer Mayer and I Am a Big Sister by Caroline Jayne Church.

Sophia loved the books. After we read them a few times, I caught her reading one aloud to the baby. I realized that not only was she getting in some reading practice, she was also bonding with her little brother.

Sophia is sometimes still jealous of all the attention her brother needs. But she’s enjoying reading about characters she can relate to. And I’m happy I’ve discovered that reading is one way to help my daughter handle challenges she faces.

Name games

When does n-a-m-e spell fun? When your youngster uses names to practice spelling. Together, list the names of everyone in your home (pets, too!), and play these games.

Park and spell

Let your child choose any name from the list and write each letter on a separate square of masking tape. Now he can stick each square on the roof of a separate toy car and drive the cars around to scramble the letters. Then, ask him to “park” the cars in order to spell the name. Hint: He could refer to the list if he needs help.

Draw and guess

Take turns secretly picking a name and drawing a picture of something that starts with each letter. For Paul, you could draw a pickle, an apple, an umbrella, and a lion.

Can your youngster figure out the name you chose?
Details make stories sparkle!

The best stories are full of details that make the reader feel like part of the action. Your child can help readers connect to her writing with these ideas.

How was your day?
Take turns telling each other about your day, and ask questions to get more specific information. If your youngster says, “We played a fun soccer game in PE,” you could ask what made it fun. Maybe she’ll add, “We learned a ‘Catch Me if You Can’ drill for dribbling faster.” Do this regularly, and she’ll get used to including more details—whether she’s talking or writing.

Observe a scene
With your child, look out the same window for one minute. Now write what you saw, in as much detail as possible. (“A woman wearing a black-and-white polka-dotted dress and red shoes got into a silver car.”) Compare your write-ups.

Your youngster will see that there are many choices when selecting details for a story.

Collect examples
Let your child keep an eye out for interesting details in books. She could jot them in a notebook or on sticky notes and use them to inspire her own writing. For example, she might notice ways an author describes weather (“Cold rain pelted her windbreaker”) and characters’ feelings (“Her rainbow-striped umbrella matched her sunny mood”).

After-school reading
Getting involved in school and community activities is a great way to strengthen your youngster’s reading skills. Consider these suggestions.

• At school. Encourage your child to try out for a school play. If he lands a speaking part, he’ll get plenty of reading practice as he learns his lines. Or suggest that he join the band, orchestra, or chorus—reading music is a kind of reading, too.

• In the community. Animals can be great listeners—and your youngster may feel especially comfortable reading to them! Check your library and local animal shelters for programs that allow children to read to dogs or other animals.
What should I read aloud?

Your child is becoming an independent reader—but that doesn’t mean you have to stop reading aloud. In fact, older readers reap many benefits from story time. Here’s advice for deciding what to read.

**Stretch his abilities.** Choose something more challenging than what your youngster can read on his own. You’ll expose him to more complex plots and harder words. Stop periodically to check whether he understands what’s going on, and keep a dictionary nearby to look up new words. Idea: Scan books or read reviews ahead of time to make sure the content isn’t too mature.

**Show enthusiasm.** Pick reading material you and your child will both enjoy. Whether it’s a full-length novel or a short article, the pleasure you take in reading it is likely to be contagious. Consider a classic book you loved at your youngster’s age or a review of a restaurant the two of you would like to try.

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**Fun with Words**

**Pronouns and verbs that agree**

Matching pronouns with verbs will be easier for your youngster after playing this game.

On separate index cards, have your child write pronouns (*I, you, he, she, it, we, and they*). She should write verbs ending with *s* (*runs, swims, skips*) on 10 additional cards and those same verbs without *s* (*run, swim, skip*) on 10 more.

Stack the pronoun and verb cards facedown in separate piles. On your turn, draw one card from each pile, and say the phrase formed (“we swim”). If the verb is correct, or if you can correct it (“we swam”), keep the verb card. (Note: The pronouns *I, you, we, and they* go with the verbs that don’t end with *s*. The pronouns *he, she, and it* take verbs ending with *s*.)

Return the pronoun to the bottom of its pile. Continue until no verb cards are left—the player with the most verbs wins.

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**Q&A**

**Reading homework**

*A lot of my daughter’s language arts homework this year involves reading silently. I’m used to looking over her finished homework, but I can’t do that for reading. How can I support her?*

**A** Being nearby when your child reads is a great way to offer support. Show interest by asking what she’s reading about. If her assignment is a longer book, find out how many pages or chapters she’s supposed to read, and help her set aside enough time to complete it.

When she has finished reading, ask what she liked or didn’t like about the book. You might also encourage her to read her favorite part aloud to you. If she’s supposed to record her reactions in a reading journal or write answers to discussion questions, you could look over her written work to be sure it’s complete.

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**Parent 2 Parent**

**In my opinion...**

My son Ethan recently discovered the letters to the editor page of his favorite magazine. When I explained that the letters were sent in by readers just like him, he wanted to submit one, too.

Because my son has been asking for his own TV, he decided he would respond to an article saying kids shouldn’t have TVs in their bedrooms. I told him the editor would be more likely to publish his letter if it mentioned information from the article.

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To provide busy parents with practical ways to promote their children’s reading, writing, and language skills.

**OUR PURPOSE**

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