



UPONLY LEARNING · FREE FOR PARENTS

The Parent's Reading Guide

A practical guide for parents

How to raise a strong reader who understands what they read, without being a teacher and without the battles.

Dr. Evan J. Hasson, DC

One step at a time.

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Short on time? Start here

We know parents are busy. If you can't find time to read the whole guide, this summary covers the main points so you can start helping tonight. Each point names the chapter to read when you have more time.

1. Reading the words isn't the same as understanding them. A student can read aloud perfectly and take in very little. Comprehension is a set of habits, and habits can be taught at home in a few minutes a day. **Ch. 1**

2. Keep reading positive. Never call anyone "not a reader." Comics, graphic novels, magazines and audiobooks all count. Let your student choose what to read at home, don't compare siblings, and don't use reading as a punishment. Let them see you read. **Ch. 2**

3. Reading has two sides: decoding × comprehension. Decoding is getting the words off the page; comprehension is understanding them. Slow, stumbling reading points to decoding. Smooth reading with a thin retelling points to comprehension. They need different help. Young students learn to read best by sounding words out, not guessing from pictures. **Ch. 3**

4. Ask before, during and after reading. Before: "What do you think this is about?" During: "What do you picture?" "Why did she do that?" After: "Tell me about it in two sentences." And always: "What in the book made you think that?" Two or three questions a session, a conversation, not a quiz. **Ch. 4**

5. Give tools for hard texts, not explanations. Use context clues and word parts for unknown words. Teach inference as "It says... + I know... = So..." and summarizing as "Somebody wanted, but, so, then." Preview, read in chunks, and reread. Use summaries as a preview, never a replacement. **Ch. 5**

6. Read aloud every day, at every age. Students understand books well above what they can read alone, and listening builds vocabulary and knowledge. Add small habits: subtitles on, library trips, family reading time, real-life reading like recipes and contracts. **Ch. 6**

7. Take the fight out of reading homework. Let the reading log follow the reading. Use RACE for written answers (Restate, Answer, Cite, Explain). For essays: talk first, outline, then draft over several days, and ask questions instead of rewriting their work. **Ch. 7**

8. Act early if something's wrong. Still struggling to sound out simple words past the middle of first grade, reading that stays slow despite practice, or real distress about reading: talk to the teacher. You can request a free school evaluation for dyslexia or other learning differences in writing. Early help makes the biggest difference. **Ch. 8**

IF YOU DO JUST ONE THING

Read aloud to your student for ten minutes tonight, whatever their age, and afterward ask, "What was your favorite part, and why?" Then keep the fridge card (last page) where you'll see it.

START HERE

You don't have to be a teacher to raise a strong reader

You need three things: time with books that doesn't feel like a test, a handful of good questions, and a rough idea of what reading involves at each age. This guide gives you all three.

Many parents assume reading takes care of itself once a student "can read." Then something doesn't add up. Your student reads a page aloud perfectly and can't tell you what it was about. Or they read slowly and hate every minute. Or the reading log turns into a nightly argument, and the book report is due tomorrow.

Reading is two skills, not one: getting the words off the page, and understanding what they mean. Most of the trouble parents see comes from one side being weaker than the other. Once you know which side, you know what to do. That idea runs through this whole guide.

WHAT THIS GUIDE IS

A practical handbook for the parent, not the student. It explains how reading develops in plain words, gives you questions to ask before, during and after reading, shows you how to help with harder texts without doing the work, and helps you decide when home help is enough. It covers kindergarten through high school, because the job changes as your student grows.

WHAT THIS GUIDE IS NOT

It is not a phonics program, and it will not turn you into a reading specialist. If your student needs specialist help, Chapter 8 explains how to tell and where to start.

How to read it

If you have...	Read first	Then
Ten minutes tonight	The fridge card (last page) and Chapter 4	Chapter 6 this weekend
A student who reads the words but doesn't understand	Chapter 3, then Chapter 5	Chapter 4
A young student learning to read	Chapter 3, kindergarten to 2nd grade	Chapters 6 and 8
Reading-log and book-report fights	Chapter 7	Chapter 2
A student who says "I hate reading"	Chapter 2	Chapters 6 and 8

A teenager with hard assigned texts	Chapter 3, high school section	Chapters 5 and 7
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A COMPANION TO THE MATH GUIDE

This guide follows the same shape as our free Parent's Math Guide, so if you've read one, the other will feel familiar. You don't need to buy anything to use either one: a library card and the books already in your home are enough.

CHAPTER 1

You're not alone

"They can read the words, but they don't understand them." If that sentence sounds familiar, you're in good company. It's one of the most common worries parents have about reading.

Why reading is harder to help with than it looks

Reading happens inside the head. With math you can see the work on the page. With reading, the understanding (or the lack of it) is invisible until you ask the right question. A student can turn every page of a chapter and take in very little.

Fluent reading aloud can hide a comprehension problem. A student who reads smoothly sounds like a strong reader. Parents and even teachers can miss that the meaning isn't landing, especially once students stop reading aloud in third or fourth grade.

The texts change under them. In the early grades, students read stories with familiar words. From about third grade on, more of their reading is textbooks, articles and novels full of unfamiliar words and ideas. A student who did fine with picture books can suddenly struggle, not because they got worse, but because the reading got harder.

"Just read more" isn't a plan. Reading more does help. But a student who doesn't understand what they read can read a lot and gain little. They need someone to show them how to think while reading, and that's something you can do.

Struggling with reading says nothing about intelligence

Some very bright students find reading hard, for reasons that have nothing to do with how smart they are: a gap in phonics, limited vocabulary in a subject, little background knowledge about a topic, or a learning difference such as dyslexia. Every one of those can be worked on.

THE ONE IDEA TO KEEP

Comprehension is a set of habits, not a gift. Asking questions while reading, picturing what's happening, connecting the text to what you already know, noticing when something doesn't make sense: strong readers do these without thinking. Every one of them can be taught, at the kitchen table, in a few minutes a day.

What success looks like

- Your student reads, at least sometimes, without being told to.
- They can tell you in their own words what they read.
- When something doesn't make sense, they notice and go back.
- Reading homework gets done without a nightly fight.

- You know roughly how they're doing, and you'd notice early if something were wrong.

Mindset first: keeping reading positive at home

Students who enjoy reading read more, and students who read more get better at it. The way your family talks about reading starts that cycle, or stops it.

Never call anyone "not a reader"

"He's just not a reader" is said kindly, often in front of the student, and it sticks. Like "not a math person," it describes a moment as if it were permanent. A student who hasn't found the right book, or who finds reading hard right now, can become a strong reader. Say what's true instead: "He hasn't found his kind of book yet."

What counts as reading? Almost everything

Comics and graphic novels count. Magazines, sports pages, joke books, cookbooks, game guides, song lyrics and subtitles count. Audiobooks build vocabulary, background knowledge and a love of stories, and they're a real way to read, especially for a student whose decoding hasn't caught up with their thinking. Rereading a favorite book for the fifth time counts too: rereading builds fluency.

School will ask for certain kinds of reading. At home, let your student read what they love. That's what builds the habit.

Instead of	Try
"That book is too easy for you."	"What do you like about this one?"
"Comics aren't real reading."	"Tell me what's happening in this one."
"Your sister was reading chapter books at your age."	(Say nothing. Never compare.)
"You have to read for 20 minutes or no screens."	"Let's all read for a bit after dinner. Want to pick the spot?"
"Sound it out!" (said with a sigh)	"Let's look at that word together."
"Why don't you understand? You just read it."	"That part was tricky. Let's read it again together."

Be careful with rewards and punishments

Reading charts and prizes can help get a habit started. But if reading only happens for a reward, or is used as a punishment ("Go to your room and read"), students learn that reading is something unpleasant. The best reward for reading is more reading: a trip to the library, a new book in a series they love, staying up fifteen minutes later to finish a chapter.

Let them see you read

Students copy what adults do more than what adults say. Let your student see you reading anything: a novel, the news, a manual, a recipe. Talk about what you read: "I read something interesting today..." You are showing them that reading is something adults choose to do.

Choice matters

Students are more likely to finish books they chose. Let them pick, even if the choice seems too easy, too silly or too hard. If a book is too hard, they'll put it down; if it's too easy, they're building fluency and confidence. Both are fine at home.

For teenagers

- **Respect their taste.** Fantasy series, manga, sports biographies, online articles about their hobby: all reading.
- **Talk, don't quiz.** "Anything good in that book?" invites conversation. "What's the theme?" feels like school.
- **Share your own reading.** Send them an article you think they'd like. Ask their opinion on something you read.
- **Keep audiobooks in play.** Commutes, workouts and chores are good listening time, and teens often listen to far more than they'd read on paper.

TRY THIS WEEK

Take your student to the library and let them choose any three books, with no comments from you about the choices. See which one they actually finish.

The two sides of reading

Reading is decoding (getting the words off the page) multiplied by comprehension (understanding what the words mean). A student needs both, and when one is weak, reading breaks down.

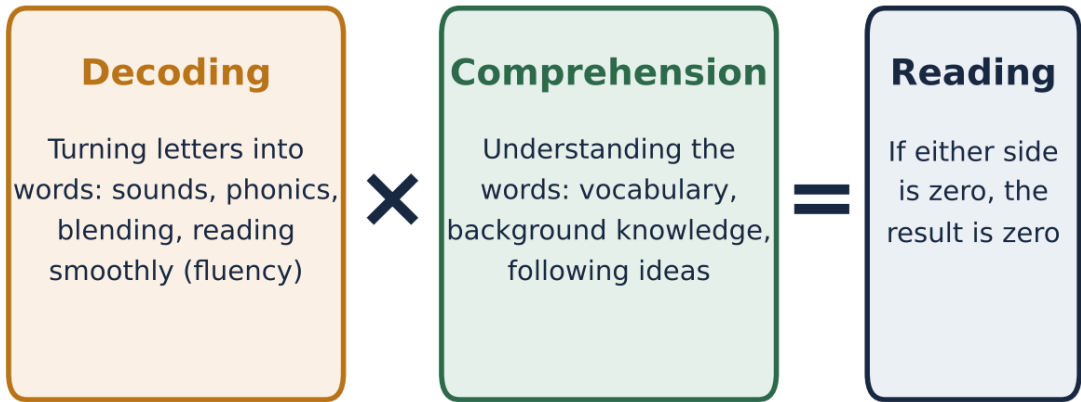


Figure 3.1. The two sides of reading. Researchers call this the Simple View of Reading (Gough and Tunmer, 1986). It's multiplication, not addition: strength on one side can't make up for a zero on the other.

Decoding is turning written letters into spoken words. It starts with hearing the separate sounds in words, then learning which letters make which sounds (phonics), then blending sounds into words, and finally reading smoothly enough that it takes no effort. That smooth, accurate, expressive reading is called **fluency**.

Comprehension is understanding the words once they're decoded. It depends on **vocabulary** (knowing what the words mean), **background knowledge** (knowing enough about the topic to make sense of it), and habits of thinking while reading.

Why this matters for you

The two sides need different kinds of help. Here's how to tell which one is weak:

What you notice	Likely weak side	What helps
Reads slowly, stumbles, guesses at words, skips words	Decoding	Phonics practice, rereading, reading aloud together (Chapter 8)
Reads smoothly but can't say what it was about	Comprehension	Questions while reading, vocabulary, summarizing (Chapters 4 and 5)
Understands well when you read to them, not when they read alone	Decoding	Decoding practice, plus audiobooks so their thinking keeps growing

Struggles with one subject's reading (science, history) but not stories	Background knowledge and vocabulary	Build knowledge of the topic: videos, simpler books, talk
Both the words and the meaning are hard	Both	Start with decoding; read harder books aloud to them meanwhile

A QUICK CHECK YOU CAN DO TONIGHT

Have your student read a page aloud from a book at their grade level. Listen for accuracy and smoothness. Then close the book and say, "Tell me what that was about." Stumbling on many words points to decoding. Smooth reading with a thin retelling points to comprehension.

Kindergarten to 2nd grade: learning to read

In the early grades the main job is decoding. Large research reviews, such as the National Reading Panel's in 2000, found that explicitly teaching the connection between sounds and letters helps students learn to read. Most schools now teach it step by step:

- **Hearing sounds (phonemic awareness).** Before letters, students learn that "cat" is made of three sounds: /k/ /a/ /t/. Rhyming games and "What sound does *sun* start with?" build this.
- **Letters and sounds (phonics).** Each letter or letter group stands for a sound: *s* says /s/, *sh* says /sh/.
- **Blending.** Saying the sounds and pushing them together: /m/ /a/ /p/, map.
- **Decodable books.** Simple books built from the sounds a student has learned, so they can read every word by sounding it out rather than guessing.
- **High-frequency words.** Common words like *the*, *said*, *was* that students learn to recognize quickly, many of which can still be partly sounded out.

WATCH OUT

Avoid teaching your student to guess words from the picture or the first letter ("What would make sense here?"). It can look like reading in easy books, but it stops working as soon as books have fewer pictures and harder words. Many reading researchers now advise against it. When your student is stuck on a word, point to it and say, "Let's sound it out together," starting from the first letter and going all the way through.

Comprehension still starts now

While young students are learning to decode, their understanding grows mostly through listening. Read aloud to them every day, books well above what they can read alone, and talk about the stories. Vocabulary and background knowledge built now pay off for years.

What you can do at home

- Play sound games: "I spy something that starts with /b/." "What rhymes with *hat*?"
- When they read to you, let them work out words. Wait a few seconds before helping.
- Reread favorite books. Rereading builds fluency and confidence.
- Read aloud to them every day, even after they can read on their own.

3rd to 5th grade: reading to learn

Around third grade, school shifts from *learning to read* to *reading to learn*. Students read textbooks, articles and longer novels, and they're expected to understand and use what they read in every subject. This is the point where hidden decoding problems often show up, and where comprehension starts to matter much more.

What's being taught

- **Fluency:** reading grade-level text accurately, at a comfortable pace, with expression.
- **Longer words:** breaking words into syllables and parts (*un-break-able*).
- **Main idea and details:** what a passage is mostly about, and what supports it.
- **Summarizing:** retelling briefly, in their own words.
- **Theme:** the lesson or message of a story.
- **Nonfiction text features:** headings, captions, diagrams, bold words and how to use them.
- **Figurative language:** similes, metaphors and idioms ("it's raining cats and dogs").

What you can do at home

- Keep reading aloud together. Take turns reading pages of a book that's a little hard for them alone.
- Ask them to explain what they read in a sentence or two. That's summarizing.
- Talk about new words you meet anywhere, and use them yourself.
- Feed curiosity with nonfiction: animals, space, sports, history, whatever they love. Background knowledge is a big part of comprehension.

6th to 8th grade: reading between the lines

Middle school reading asks students to understand what the text *doesn't* say outright. They read more complex novels, primary sources in history, and science texts full of specialized words.

What's being taught

- **Inference:** working out what the author implies from clues in the text (Chapter 5 shows how).
- **Citing evidence:** backing up an answer with a quote or detail from the text. You'll hear "use text evidence" a lot.
- **Central idea and theme,** developed across a whole text.
- **Point of view:** who is telling the story, and how that shapes what we learn.
- **Arguments:** finding an author's claim and judging whether the reasons and evidence support it.
- **Comparing texts:** a novel and a film, two articles on one topic.

Your role starts shifting from reading partner to conversation partner. Talk about books, articles and films with your student as you would with an adult friend. Ask what they think and why.

High school: analysis, argument and complex texts

High school English asks students to analyze: not just what a text says, but how and why the author wrote it that way. Students read classic and modern literature, poetry, plays, speeches and essays, and write about them. Reading in history and science gets denser too.

What's being taught

- **Literary analysis:** how an author uses characters, structure, symbols and word choice to build meaning.
- **Rhetoric:** how speakers and writers persuade, and whether their arguments hold up.
- **Complex texts:** older language (Shakespeare, founding documents), long sentences and unfamiliar ideas.
- **Research:** finding, judging and citing sources.
- **College-entrance reading:** the SAT and ACT include reading sections with passages from literature, history and science.

What a parent can do in high school

- **Be curious, not a checker.** "What are you reading in English? What do you think of it?" Explaining a book to you is good practice for writing about it.
- **Suggest tools for hard texts.** Reading a summary or watching a performance *before* reading Shakespeare can make the text far easier, as long as it's a preview and not a replacement.
- **Talk about the news.** Read an editorial and ask: what's the argument? Is it convincing? What's left out? That's exactly the skill English class teaches.
- **Keep audiobooks and annotated editions in mind** for students who find long assigned books slow going.
- **Watch the pattern.** Assignments not getting done, avoiding reading, or a big gap between how well they talk about a book and how well they write about it are all signals worth a conversation with the teacher.

Questions that build comprehension

"What happened?" gets a shrug. Better questions, asked before, during and after reading, teach your student to think while they read. That habit is what comprehension is.

You don't need to have read the book to ask any of these. Pick two or three per reading session, not ten. It should feel like a conversation, not a quiz.

Before reading: warm up the brain

- "Look at the cover and the title. What do you think this is about?"
- "What do you already know about this topic?"
- "Why do you think the author wrote this?"
- For nonfiction: "Let's look at the headings and pictures first. What will we learn?"
- For the next chapter: "What happened last time? What do you think happens next?"

During reading: stop and think

- "What's happening right now?"
- "What do you picture in your head?"
- "Why do you think the character did that?"
- "Was that what you expected? What do you think will happen now?"
- "Was there a word you didn't know? What do you think it means?"
- "Did that part make sense? Let's read it again if not."

After reading: put it together

- "Tell me about it in two or three sentences." (summarizing)
- "What was the most important part? Why?" (main idea)
- "What do you think the author wants us to learn?" (theme)
- "How did the character change from the beginning to the end?"
- "Does this remind you of anything, from another book, a movie or your own life?"
- "What would you have done in that situation?"
- "What's one thing you'd ask the author?"

For nonfiction

- "What's the main thing this is teaching?"
- "What's one fact that surprised you?"
- "What does this diagram (map, chart) show?"

- "How could you explain this to someone younger?"
- For articles and opinion pieces: "What's the author trying to convince us of? Do you agree?"

ASK "HOW DO YOU KNOW?"

After any answer, ask "What in the book made you think that?" This one question is the heart of middle and high school English: answering with evidence from the text. You can start it in kindergarten.

Questions by age

Age band	Questions that work well
K–2	"What do you see in the picture?" · "Who is in the story?" · "What happened first, next, last?" · "How do you think she feels?"
3–5	"What's the main idea?" · "Why did that happen?" · "What's the lesson?" · "What does that word mean here?"
6–8	"What can you figure out that the author didn't say?" · "Whose point of view is this?" · "What's the evidence?" · "Do you buy the argument?"
9–12	"Why do you think the author chose that word (or ending)?" · "What's the bigger idea?" · "How does this connect to today?" · "What would you argue about it?"

CHAPTER 5

How to help with harder texts

When a text gets hard, the temptation is to explain it. Instead, give your student a tool for working it out. The tools below work for a third grader's science article and a senior's Shakespeare.

Unknown words

- **Context clues.** Reread the sentence and the ones around it. "The *arid* land had not seen rain in months." What does *arid* probably mean? (Dry.)
- **Word parts.** Many English words are built from pieces. *Un-* means not, *re-* means again, *-less* means without, *bio* means life. *Unbreakable*: not able to be broken.
- **Look it up, then use it.** A dictionary is fine, but the word sticks only when they use it. Try it in a sentence together.
- **Don't stop for every word.** If the meaning is still clear, keep going. Stop for words that block understanding.

Finding the main idea

Ask: "If you had to tell me what this is about in one sentence, what would you say?" Then: "Which details back that up?" For nonfiction, the main idea is often in the first or last paragraph, and headings are big clues. If your student lists every detail, ask: "Which one is the most important?"

Making inferences

An **inference** is a conclusion drawn from clues in the text plus what you already know. Authors expect readers to make them constantly. Teach the three-part chart: **It says... + I know... = So...**

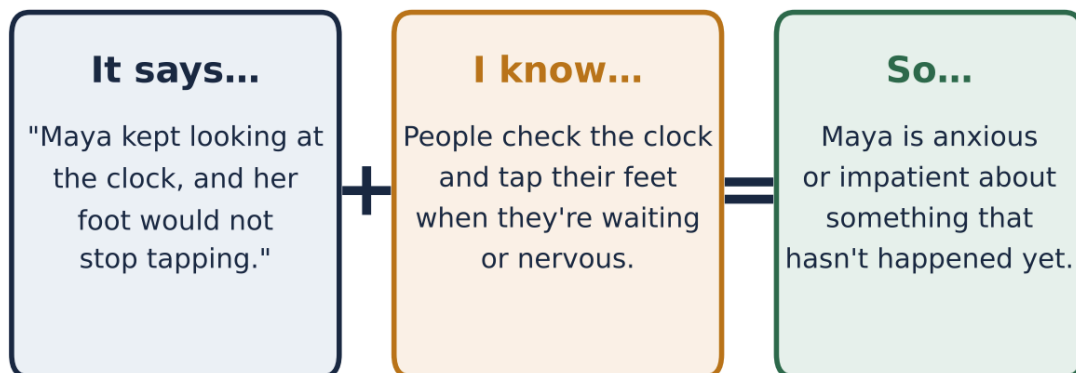


Figure 5.1. An inference. The text never says Maya is nervous, but the clues plus what we know about people tell us.

Summarizing

For fiction, many classrooms use **Somebody, Wanted, But, So, Then**:

Somebody	Wanted	But	So	Then
Who is the main character?	What did they want?	What was the problem?	What did they do about it?	How did it end?
Cinderella	wanted to go to the ball,	but her stepmother wouldn't let her,	so her fairy godmother helped her go,	then the prince found her with the glass slipper.

For nonfiction, ask for the main idea plus the two or three most important supporting points.

Strategies for a hard passage

1. **Preview.** Look at the title, headings, pictures and questions first, so the brain knows what's coming.
2. **Chunk it.** Read one paragraph, then stop and say what it was about before going on.
3. **Read it twice.** Once for the general idea, once for details. Strong readers reread all the time.
4. **Read it aloud.** Hearing it, especially older or formal language, often makes it clearer.
5. **Mark it up.** Older students can underline key ideas, circle unknown words and write questions in the margin, or on sticky notes for library books.
6. **Build background first.** A short video or a simpler book on the same topic makes a hard text far easier.

WATCH OUT

Don't explain the whole text, and don't let a summary or study guide replace the reading. It solves tonight's assignment and skips the practice. Use summaries and videos as a preview before reading, not a substitute.

CHAPTER 6

Five-to-ten-minute everyday reading habits

Strong readers aren't built in long sessions. They're built from small, pleasant habits repeated most days.

Read aloud, at every age

Reading aloud to your student is one of the most useful things you can do, and it shouldn't stop when they learn to read. Students can understand books well above the level they can read alone. Hearing those books builds vocabulary, background knowledge and a sense of how good sentences sound. Ten minutes at bedtime counts. So does a chapter in the car, or an audiobook the whole family listens to.

Kindergarten to 2nd grade

Habit	How
Daily read-aloud	One or two picture books a day. Point to words as you read now and then. Pause to ask "What do you think happens next?"
Words in the world	Read signs, menus, cereal boxes and labels together. "That sign says STOP. What sound does it start with?"
Sound games	Rhymes, "I spy" with sounds, clapping syllables in names.
Their turn	They read a decodable book or a familiar favorite to you, a sibling, or a stuffed animal.

3rd to 5th grade

Habit	How
Shared chapter books	Take turns reading pages of a book that's a little hard for them alone.
Book talk at dinner	"What's happening in your book?" Share what you're reading too.
Real-life reading	Recipes (they read, you cook), game instructions, a map on a trip, a museum sign.
Library trips	Regular visits where they choose freely. Series books are great for building a habit.
Subtitles on	Turn captions on for TV and movies. It's extra reading practice with no effort.

6th to 8th grade

Habit	How
Family reading time	Twenty minutes where everyone reads something, phones away, including the adults.
Read the same book	Read a book they're reading and talk about it, like a two-person book club.
Interest-driven nonfiction	Articles, biographies and how-to guides about their hobbies.
Audiobooks	On the way to school, during chores, at bedtime.

High school

Habit	How
Share articles	Send them something you think they'd find interesting. Ask what they thought.
Talk about the news	"What's this article arguing? Do you buy it?" That's rhetoric, at the dinner table.
Real-world documents	A job application, a lease, a phone contract, a car manual, terms and conditions. Reading the fine print is a life skill.
Their choice, protected	Leave room for reading they choose, even in a busy schedule. It keeps reading from becoming only homework.

MAKE IT EASY

Keep books everywhere: in the car, by the bed, in the bathroom, next to the couch. Students read more when a book is always within reach and a screen isn't the only option.

Homework and assignments without the battles

Reading logs, comprehension questions, book reports and essays cause a lot of evening stress. Most of it can be eased with a little structure and a clear sense of whose job is whose.

Reading logs

- **Let the log follow the reading, not lead it.** Read first, fill in the log after. Don't stop a student who's enjoying a book because the timer went off.
- **Fold it into a routine:** the same reading time every day, so the log isn't a separate chore.
- **Be honest.** Don't fill in minutes that didn't happen. If the log is causing real conflict, tell the teacher. Most would rather know.

Comprehension questions

Many teachers ask for answers in complete sentences with evidence from the text. A common method is **RACE**:

Step	What it means	Example
Restate	Turn the question into the start of the answer.	"Maya felt nervous before the game..."
Answer	Answer every part of the question.	"...because she was afraid of letting her team down."
Cite	Give evidence from the text.	"The text says she 'kept looking at the clock.'"
Explain	Say how the evidence supports the answer.	"People often watch the clock when they're anxious about something coming."

If your student is stuck on a question, ask: "Where in the text could the answer be?" and let them find it. Don't find it for them.

Book reports and essays

1. **Talk first.** "What did you think of the book? What's the most interesting thing about it?" Students often write much better after saying their ideas out loud.
2. **Plan before writing.** A simple outline: the main point, three supporting reasons, an example for each.
3. **Break it up.** A big project becomes small steps over several days: read, take notes, outline, draft, revise.

4. **Ask, don't rewrite.** When reviewing a draft, ask questions ("What do you mean here?" "Can you give an example?") rather than fixing sentences yourself. The teacher needs to see your student's writing, not yours.
5. **Read it aloud.** Having your student read their draft aloud catches missing words and awkward sentences.

When a book is too hard

If an assigned book is far beyond your student's level, try reading it together, alternating pages, or pairing the print book with the audiobook so they can follow along. If it's a constant struggle, talk to the teacher. There may be an alternative, or it may be a sign that something needs a closer look (Chapter 8).

For teens: AI tools and summaries

Summary websites and AI chat tools can produce a book summary or even an essay in seconds. Talk openly about it. A summary used as a preview is fine; submitting work that isn't theirs is usually against school rules, and it skips the learning that the assignment exists for. Teachers increasingly ask students to write in class, so the practice matters.

Spotting gaps and when to get extra help

Most reading struggles are gaps that close with practice. Some need more. Knowing the signs, and acting early, makes a big difference.

Signs of a decoding gap

- Guesses at words from the first letter or the picture.
- Reads slowly and word by word, past second grade.
- Skips small words or word endings (-ed, -ing).
- Avoids reading aloud; reading tires them out quickly.
- Understands much better when someone reads to them.

Signs of a comprehension gap

- Reads smoothly but can't retell what they read.
- Remembers details but misses the main idea.
- Answers only questions whose answers are stated word for word.
- Doesn't notice when something stops making sense.
- Struggles more in science and social studies than with stories.

What to do

Gap	At home
Decoding	Short daily practice with decodable books or word lists; rereading the same passage several times for fluency; reading aloud together. Ask the teacher which sounds and patterns to focus on.
Fluency	Repeated reading: the same short passage three or four times across a week. Reading along with an audiobook. Reading plays or poems aloud.
Vocabulary	Read aloud harder books; talk about new words; use them in conversation; word-part study for older students.
Comprehension	The questions in Chapter 4 and the tools in Chapter 5, a few minutes each reading session. Build background knowledge on topics they'll study.

FREE PRACTICE BY GRADE

UpOnly's free Reading and English & Writing workbooks and practice sets cover kindergarten through 5th grade, in English, Spanish and Portuguese. Each lesson explains the skill before the practice, and every question has an answer key, so you can use them to check a skill or fill a gap.

When to get extra help

- Your student is past the middle of first grade and still struggling to sound out simple words.
- Reading stays slow and effortful despite regular practice.
- The gap between how well they understand when listening and when reading alone keeps growing.
- Reading causes distress: tears, stomachaches, refusing to go to school on reading days.
- Grades in several subjects are slipping because of reading.
- Your instinct says something is wrong. Parents are often right.

Your options

Option	Good for
The teacher	The first step. Ask how your student reads in class and what the school's reading assessments show.
School reading support (a reading specialist, an intervention group)	Most schools have some. Ask what's available and how students qualify.
The public library	Free books, audiobooks, reading programs, and librarians who are excellent at matching students with books.
A reading tutor or specialist	Ongoing one-on-one help. For decoding problems, look for someone trained in structured, systematic phonics instruction.
A school evaluation	When you suspect a learning difference such as dyslexia (see below).

Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a common learning difference that makes decoding and spelling unusually hard, despite good teaching and normal intelligence. Early signs can include trouble learning letter sounds, rhyming, remembering sight words and spelling, often alongside strong thinking and listening skills. It's not a vision problem, and students don't outgrow it, but with the right instruction they learn to read well. The earlier it's identified, the easier it is to help.

In the United States, parents can request in writing that their public school evaluate their student for a learning disability, at no cost to the family. Your pediatrician or the school can explain the process.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Asking for help early is never an overreaction. If it turns out to be nothing, you've lost little. If it's something, you've gained time, and with reading, time matters.

The grade-by-grade map, K–12

What most US schools teach in reading each year, based on the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts. Your state or school may differ a little; the order of skills is very similar everywhere.

Grade	The big ideas
Kindergarten	How books work (front to back, left to right); hearing rhymes and the sounds in words; letter names and sounds; reading simple words and common sight words; retelling familiar stories.
1st	Phonics for one-syllable words and common letter patterns; reading simple texts accurately; retelling with key details; telling stories from information books.
2nd	Two-syllable words and common prefixes and suffixes; reading with fluency; main topic and central message; using text features like headings.
3rd	Multi-syllable words; reading to learn across subjects; main idea and details; asking and answering questions about a text; point of view.
4th	Theme and summary; comparing points of view; explaining events and ideas in nonfiction; figurative language; reading poetry and plays.
5th	Quoting accurately from a text; comparing characters, texts and accounts of the same event; how an author supports points with reasons and evidence.
6th	Citing text evidence; central idea; how word choice affects meaning and tone; tracing an argument.
7th	Several pieces of evidence; how parts of a text interact; comparing a text with its film or audio version; evaluating arguments.
8th	The strongest evidence; how dialogue and events reveal character; analyzing conflicting viewpoints; how modern works draw on older stories.
9th–10th	Thorough evidence; complex characters; an author's use of structure and time; seminal US documents; rhetoric; world literature.
11th–12th	Interpreting complex literature, including classic American works; analyzing rhetoric and foundational documents; ambiguity; research using many sources.

REFERENCE

Reading words, translated for parents

Annotate

Mark up a text while reading: underlining, circling, writing notes and questions in the margin.

Background knowledge

What a reader already knows about a topic. It makes a huge difference to comprehension.

Blending

Pushing separate sounds together to make a word: /s/ /u/ /n/, sun.

Central idea / main idea

What a text is mostly about.

Comprehension

Understanding what you read.

Context clues

Hints in nearby words and sentences that help work out an unknown word.

Decodable text

A simple book built from the letter sounds a student has learned, so every word can be sounded out.

Decoding

Turning written letters into spoken words.

Dyslexia

A learning difference that makes decoding and spelling unusually hard despite good teaching and normal intelligence.

Figurative language

Words used in a non-literal way: similes, metaphors, idioms.

Fluency

Reading accurately, at a comfortable pace, with expression.

Genre

A type of writing: fantasy, mystery, biography, poetry, and so on.

High-frequency / sight words

Very common words students learn to recognize instantly: *the*, *was*, *said*.

Inference

A conclusion drawn from clues in the text plus what you already know.

Phonemic awareness

Hearing and working with the separate sounds in spoken words.

Phonics

The connection between letters and the sounds they stand for.

Reading level (Lexile, guided reading levels)

Ways schools measure how hard a text is. Useful for teachers; at home, interest matters as much as level.

Rhetoric

The art of persuading: how a writer or speaker tries to convince.

Text evidence

A quote or detail from the text that supports an answer.

Text features

Headings, captions, diagrams, bold words and other parts of nonfiction that help a reader.

Theme

The message or lesson of a story.

CUT OUT AND KEEP ON THE FRIDGE

Questions for any book

Before reading

"What do you think this is about?"

"What do you already know about it?"

"What happened last time?"

After reading

"Tell me about it in two sentences."

"What was the most important part?"

"What's the author's message?"

"What would you have done?"

While reading

"What do you picture?"

"Why did they do that?"

"What happens next?"

"Did that make sense?"

Always

"How do you know?"

"What in the book made you think that?"

"What does that word mean here?"

"Want to read the next chapter?"

Remember: read aloud every day, at every age. Let them choose. Talk, don't quiz.



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One step at a time.