

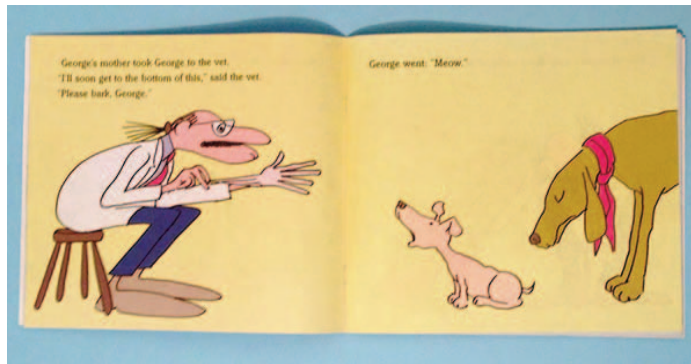
10 Great Ways to Boost Reading Comprehension for AR Tests

1. Stop and Jot:

Set a timer so that it will probably go off about four times while your child is reading a book. Each time the timer goes off, have the child stop and draw a quick picture of what is happening in the story. They could also write down in words something interesting or important that just happened in the book. This helps them visualize and remember what is happening in the story. Here are some free downloadable worksheets with places for kids to draw pictures of what is happening in the story.

2. Ask your child as many questions as you can think of!

Listen to your child read the book aloud. Before your child turns each page, stop and ask your child questions about what he or she just read. Here's an example of a page from a book and some questions to ask:



This picture is from the book, *Bark, George!* by Jules Feiffer. In the story, they take George to the vet because every time they ask him to bark, he makes a different animal's sound! Here are some possible questions that you might see in a typical AR test:

Who took George to the vet?

Why did George have to go to the vet?

What did the vet ask George to do?

What did George do when the vet asked him to bark?

What did George say the first time the vet asked him to bark? (or the second, or third, etc.)

How did George's mom probably feel when she found out that George couldn't bark?

It also helps for parents to take a look at what kinds of questions are in a typical AR test at their child's reading level. So you may want to ask your child's teacher if you can preview a test from a typical book so that you can get an idea of what kinds of questions to ask. It doesn't have to be a preview of a test your child will likely take.

3. You read to me, and I'll read to you.

Have your child read the book aloud to you, and then you read it to him. Make a recording of you, (the adult,) reading the book fluently and with good expression. (You can easily use the voice memo feature on my cell phones for this purpose.) Then let your child read the book again WITH the recording you just made. You can also get many books on tape at the library. Have your child read along with the narrator, and then try to read it themselves.

4. Find shorter books at the same grade level and test on those rather than chapter books.

Sometimes it helps to tell children that the longer chapter books, such as *The Magic Tree House* books are to be "just for fun" rather than for AR testing, because they take so long to review for a test. Shorter books can be reviewed more thoroughly and easily, and are therefore easier to pass tests on. It's less discouraging for the children.

5. Choose a book at the right reading level.

In AR, kids are supposed to do better when they stay in their "zone," or ZPD. The ZPD is the "Zone of Proximal Development" which is a fancy way of giving a child a range of reading levels (like 1.5-2.0, for example) to stick with for instructional purposes. Children in the AR program are usually given the STAR test to determine their ZPD. They should choose books that are within that range of reading levels for success. So if their range is supposed to be 1.5-2.0, don't let your child choose a book with a 2.2 reading level, because he will likely fail that test.

Children sometimes choose harder books than they are supposed to because they are trying to gain as many AR points as possible so that they can win school contests given as incentives to read. But most schools won't *count* any points from a book that is read unless the AR test is passed with 85% or more. So children shouldn't be allowed to do this. **Parents should know that if their child keeps bringing home library books that are too hard, they may be able to ask their school librarian to put a note in the child's profile that says that the child is not allowed to check out harder books. Also, parents can request that their child's teacher set testing perimeters for their child, making it impossible for the child to take an AR test on a book outside his zone, because the system won't allow it!** If the teacher does not know how to do this, he or she should ask a colleague at school for help, or do a "live chat" online with the folks at Renaissance Place and they will tell them how.

6. Get stuck on a word? After you figure it out, go back and re-read that page.

Once your child figures it out, have the child go back and re-read the whole sentence. Ask him what the sentence means. Now go back to the top of the page and re-read the whole page! If you could see the specific questions that children miss on the AR tests, and then

think back to that section of the book, you may very well find that the page with that information was a page with a couple of tricky words. When the brain switches to trying very hard to decode or sound out words, less brain power can be devoted to comprehension. So you have to get past that and help your child become fluent with those words. And those words often come up on the tests, too! And if your child doesn't know them, he's more likely to miss that question, just from not understanding the question!

7. Read an AR book five times before testing!

This is a good rule of thumb for children that are new readers, and a rule that is commonly used in some first grade classes. The children are expected to read their AR books five times before testing, and no excuses!

8. If the book is informational, (non-fiction), have children take a careful look at the headings, table of contents, and glossary if there is one.

Those features of non-fiction books that are usually in bold print, such as the headings, table of contents, and the glossary are the ones to focus on! So think of it as studying for a test- not just reading a book. They read the book to get the information and try to remember it for the test- just like the big kids do! This is excellent practice for when kids get older and they **MUST** read for information in science and social studies textbooks.

9. Have your kids practice finding the main idea of simple conversational topics first, then move on to books.

One great "teacher trick" to listen to someone just tell a very simple story aloud, such as what they did for Thanksgiving, etc. Then have your child tell the main idea of that little "story," as well as answer any "who, what, when, where, why" etc. questions you can come up with. Once your child gets used to doing that with very simple stories that they hear in conversation, they will likely be more able to do this with stories they read.

I would also suggest that teaching them to identify the setting, characters, and the different parts of the story, such as the beginning, middle, and end or conclusion. That is also very good practice, since it makes them more aware of the story structure and what to expect when they are reading. It also helps them become better writers as well! HeidiSongs.com has a song for this topic on the CD/DVD, Little Songs for Language Arts. It's called the "Parts of a Story" song! It is also available on iTunes and on Amazon.

10. What should you do if your child is STILL failing the AR test, even though you have tried lots of these strategies?

* Take the reading level **WAY** down until you find the level of books that your child is successful at. Stay on that level for a while, and build up the feeling of success. Then start inching the reading level up, little by little, keeping an eye on the test scores to make sure that you do not go past what the child is capable of doing.

* Discuss test taking strategies. If there is a word in one of the multiple choice answers that the child has never seen before, then that's probably **NOT** the correct answer!

* Check and see if your child can read "question words" fluently and easily, such as who,

what, when, where, why, how, etc. If they get stuck on just reading the question, then they can't really answer it, can they?

* Check and see if your child has a solid foundation in phonics and sight words. If your child is missing skills, then this is going to affect reading comprehension and therefore AR test scores. HeidiSongs.com has lots of resources to help children with this, especially at the pre-K, Kindergarten, and first grade level, so check us out! These also make GREAT educational gifts for the holidays!

* You may want to ask if you can watch your child take a test (although you cannot intervene and tell answers!) But watching a child take a test can be very revealing in terms of what is happening in the child's mind. Some children just want to play with the computer mouse or even just choose random answers, never relating the questions to the book they just read! They need to understand what the test is for and about.

I hope that you have found these suggestions helpful! For more detailed information, photo examples, and free downloadable worksheets related to this topic, please visit www.heidisongs.com/blog.

The specific blog post related to AR tests can be found here:

<http://www.heidisongs.com/blog/2013/11/help-my-child-keeps-failing-ar-tests.html>.

Happy Reading!

By Heidi Butkus

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