

# Handout | Kate Cain and Jane Oakhill

*Jane Oakhill is a professor of psychology at the University of Sussex, whose work has focused on identifying the problems faced by children with specific comprehension difficulties when learning to read. She has worked on projects investigating ways of improving children's comprehension as well as the difficulties that children with visual and hearing impairments experience with reading comprehension.*



^ Jane Oakhill,  
professor of psychology

*Kate Cain is a professor of psychology and Head of Department at Lancaster University. Her professional research concerns the cognitive and language-related skills underpinning the development of reading and listening comprehension, and the skill weaknesses linked to poor comprehension.*

*Jane and Kate were both consulted by the government on the comprehension-related content of the National Curriculum 2014.*



^ Kate Cain,  
professor of psychology

## What do we mean by comprehension?

### The Simple View of Reading

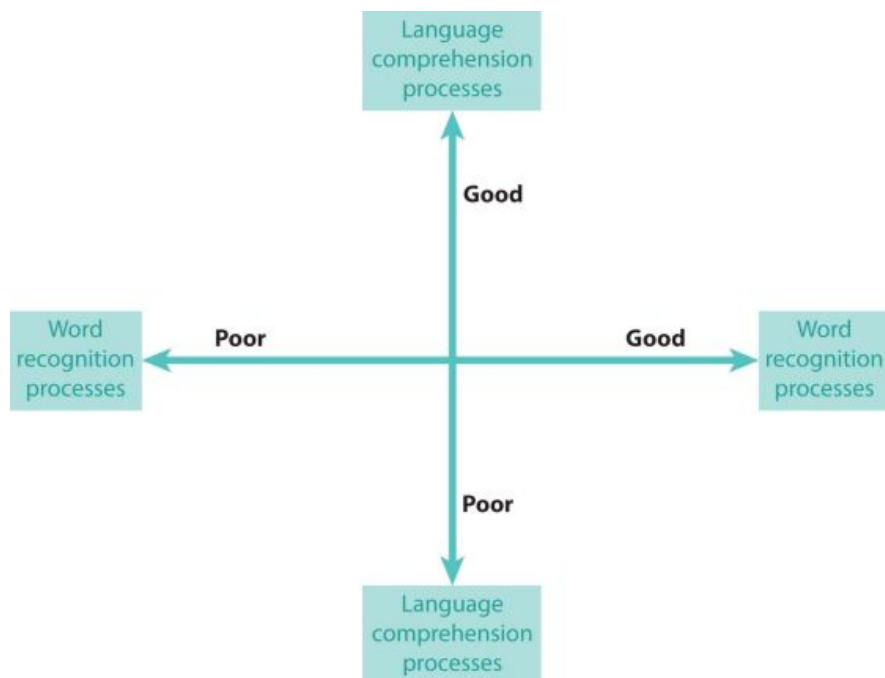
According to the Simple View of Reading, reading comprehension is the product of our ability to read the words on the page and our listening comprehension skills.

- Comprehension involves understanding words, understanding sentences, and putting these together to extract the overall message of the text.
- With the exception of decoding the words on the page, the skills, knowledge bases and cognitive processes that we use to understand text are the same for both listening and reading comprehension.
- The Simple View of Reading does not propose that learning to read is simple; instead it provides a clear and easy framework to understand how word reading and listening comprehension skills combine to enable understanding of written text.

### Learning to read and reading to learn

The Simple View of Reading is a good framework for understanding the transition between learning to read and reading to learn. When we talk about learning to read, we are typically thinking about learning to read words – or to decode. For an alphabetic writing system, such as English, children need to learn how individual letters and letter combinations on the page represent our spoken language. Good decoding skills enable readers to:

- tackle unknown words
- become independent readers.



In the early stages, word-reading skills will limit a child's comprehension of written text. In other words, they will not be able to read and understand complex texts that are beyond their word-reading level. However, the same child will already have developed listening comprehension skills through shared book reading and other activities, and will be able to follow and understand texts read aloud to them that are more advanced than the texts they can read alone.

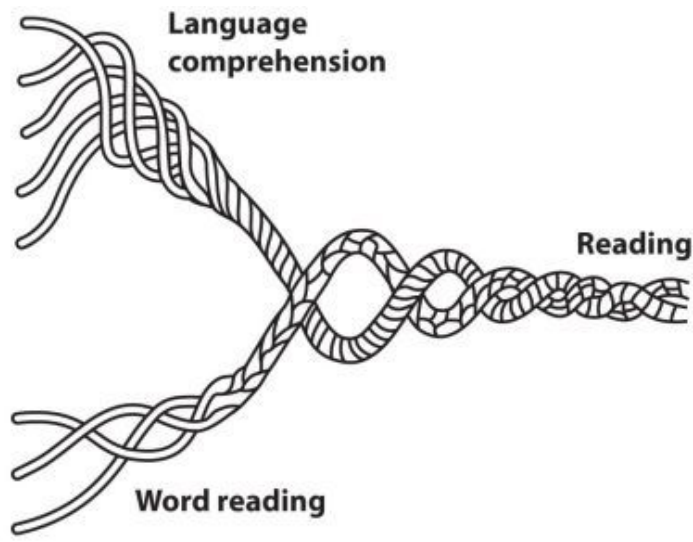
- As a child's word-reading skills become more accurate and reading becomes more fluent, they can focus their efforts on comprehension.
- Listening comprehension then becomes the main predictor of a child's reading comprehension skill. Indeed, for adults, differences in listening comprehension skill predict differences in reading comprehension skill.
- Listening comprehension skills can be developed simply by reading aloud to children, asking questions and scaffolding understanding, using similar techniques to guided reading.

## Scarborough's 'Rope model'

The Simple View of Reading describes the two main aspects of reading: word reading and language comprehension. Each of these aspects is comprised of a number of processes, which are nicely illustrated by reference to Scarborough's 'Rope model'. The model shows that language comprehension requires a number of different, but interrelated, processes.

1. The reader or listener needs to activate the meanings of the words in the text.
2. The meanings of sentences need to be understood.
3. Inferences need to be made to link the ideas in the text, and to make connections between background and cultural knowledge and the text.
4. Ongoing comprehension needs to be monitored to ensure that the reader or listener is on track, that the mental model that is developing is coherent, and to guide inference-making.
5. The reader should use the structure of the text to guide expectations about the storyline or where to find information.

- Activating word meanings
- Understanding sentences
- Making inferences
- Comprehension monitoring
- Understanding text structure



- Letter-sound knowledge
- Accurate word decoding
- Automaticity in decoding

Many of these comprehension skills can be developed before children start learning to read – in oral language and when listening to stories. The model can also help in identifying individual children’s difficulties with comprehension. It may be that a child has one skill in abundance (extensive and rich vocabulary knowledge for instance) but does not use inference and monitoring skills to support their comprehension.

The Simple View of Reading and the Rope model are useful in that they help us to think clearly about the skills that are needed for effective comprehension. With a good understanding of comprehension and its component processes, you should be able to make an informed assessment of the most likely reason or reasons for a particular child’s reading difficulties, and should be able to identify a suitable programme to support that child’s comprehension development.

‘Reading Rope’ diagram from Peggy McCardle, Hollis S Scarborough and Hugh W Catts: ‘Predicting, Explaining and Preventing Children’s Reading Difficulties’, Learning Disabilities Research & Practice 16:4 (2001), copyright © 2001 The Division for Learning Disabilities of the Council for Exceptional Children.

Simple view of reading diagram from D Shankweiler et al: ‘Comprehension and decoding: Patterns of association in children with reading difficulties, Scientific Studies of Reading 3:1 (1999), copyright © Routledge 1999, used by permission of Taylor & Francis via Copyright Clearance Center.

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