**Three Level Guides**

What are they?

Three Level Guides were developed by Herber (1970) as a means of improving comprehension. Herber reasoned that to comprehend, readers first have to locate information and see what the author actually says. Then they have to interpret what the author might mean, and finally, they have to be able to use this information. This provides a three step or three level mode of comprehension.

1. Literal Comprehension: reading on the lines to see what is actually said.
2. Interpretive Comprehension: reading between the lines to make inferences about what the author might mean.
3. Applied Comprehension: reading beyond the lines to make associations with other knowledge, to solve problems and to modify existing perceptions.

**What do Three Level Guides look like?**

They consist of a series of statements, not questions. The statements are directed at the three levels of comprehension – literal, interpretive and applied.

Instead of relying on general discussion or random questioning, the teacher prepares a set of statements for students to consider as to whether or not certain meanings are contained in the text.

The students each have a copy of the statements to help them think through their responses and to be able to justify their stance. They will also need access to the text. The students work in groups, preferably mixed-ability groups, to work out their responses and to find supporting data in the text. As a group they must come to a consensus. They then report to the larger group.

The questions tap into three levels of comprehension. Level 1 involves literal comprehension. Level 2 involves interpretative comprehension and Level 3 involves applied comprehension.

**Level 1** requires literal understanding. Students have to be able to locate and accurately identify information provided in the text. Accurate identification of relevant information is always important, particularly in information texts. Such information is needed to be able to arrive at certain conclusions.

**Level 2** requires interpretation of meaning. Readers must think through the implications of what is stated literally. Readers may be required to infer various meanings from the stated meanings.

**Level 3** requires students to think beyond the text and the literal and inferred meanings. Readers need to be able to look at the generalized notions, the concepts and the philosophical stance that underpins the meanings of the text.

Using Three level guides involves a process of identifying stated information (literal meaning), drawing inferences from those statements (interpretative meaning) and then considering the wider generalizations.

**Steps**

1. Students read the text or become familiar with the text through shared reading, supported reading, etc.

2. Students work in a group (4 to 6 is ideal) to decide whether the statements are true or false and to identify the parts of the text that substantiate their view. The groups must come to a consensus.

3. Groups report to the teacher and to the whole class and provide supporting evidence.

4. If students have opinions which are at variance with the opinions of others they must re-examine the evidence and reflect on the thinking that has led to the different conclusions until they can reach a consensus.

It is through this process that growth in understanding occurs.

**How can I adapt the strategy?**

Students can complete the guide by ticking true statements as individuals. They can then compare their answers with those of a partner. Where disagreements arise, discussion should occur until one has convinced the other to change his tick or cross.

The strategy is particularly successful when used as a ‘way in’ to a poem or a short story.

**Where can I find out more?**

A more detailed account of three level guides to assist in the formulation of the statements and in working through the activity is given in:

Learning to learn from text: Effective reading in the content areas by A. Morris and N. Stewart-Dore, Addison-Wesley, Australia. 1984. pp. 98-106.

First Steps: Reading Resource Book. Education Department of Western Australia. Longman Cheshire, 1994. pp. 83-85.

**Three Level Guide Example:** **“Hills Like White Elephants”** a short story by Ernest Hemingway

**Level 1 Literal** Tick those statements which appear in the text. The statements may be worded differently, but they may have the same meaning. Be ready to explain your reasons.

* The day was not hot.
* The country in front of the white line of hills was rich and green.
* The couple have been seeking out new experiences.
* The girl enjoyed her Anis del Toro.
* The couple have completed their travels.
* Only one thing is causing the couple unhappiness, according to the American.
* The girl feels that she and the American can still have everything.
* The man does not want the girl to have an operation.
* The girl wants to continue discussing the situation with the man.

**Level 2 Inferential** Tick those statements which can be inferred from the text. That is, tick the statements which state what Hemingway means. Be ready to justify your choices.

* The girl is pregnant.
* The man wants the girl to have an abortion.
* The girl enjoys travelling and having new experiences more than the man does.
* The man is looking forward to the coming birth.
* The man is frustrated by the girl’s attitude.
* The girl is ready to ‘settle down’.
* The girl is beginning to grow weary of travel and the search for new experiences. The man genuinely doesn’t want the girl to have an abortion if she’s not happy about it.
* The girl is happy to go along with the man’s suggestion.
* The couple will be happy again after the abortion.
* The girl is waiting unreasonably for the train.

**Level 3 Evaluative** Tick those statements which you think Hemingway would agree with. Use the text to justify your choices.

* It is better to travel than to arrive.
* Life can be meaningful if lived fully.
* Hedonism is ultimately meaningless.
* All human life is precious.
* Children are an unwanted burden.

Add any statements of your own which you think better sum up Hemingway’s message in the story.