

Rubric Category	Comprehensive Understanding
Grade/Score	Grades 6-12 / Score 1
Rubric Category	Development
Grade/Score	Grades 6-12 / Score 1
CCSS Writing Standards	W1, W1a
Argument Type	Primarily literary

Chunking and Retelling for Comprehension

Students organize, summarize, and explain important events from the text in order to improve their understanding of plot, character, and theme.

Understanding the Expectations

Sometimes during the reading and writing process, you begin to realize that you don't understand all of the details of a story as well as you need to. This confusion may arise when you are reading and lose track of the story, or it can show up when you have difficulty writing an essay that demonstrates strong and comprehensive knowledge of a text. Because the most interesting, meaningful stories are often complex or have moments where characters make strange or surprising decisions, this kind of confusion is a very normal thing to experience. However, in order to write a strong response to a story, you need to gain a strong understanding of events, characters, and themes. Regardless of when and how you realize you don't fully understand the story, there are some helpful steps you can take to shore up your understanding and to support strong writing, all at the same time.

Rereading

It may seem to you at first that being confused or having questions is a sign that you are not a strong reader. In truth, the opposite is probably true! One technique that strong readers use very frequently is to read a confusing section—or sometimes the entire story—again. With some stories, really strong understanding of the plot and themes is only possible on a second or third read.

Chunking

One way to help improve your understanding of a text and to help identify gaps in your knowledge is to retell the events of the story in your own words. There are many methods for summarizing and retelling, but one strong one is to break the story into “chunks” by identifying the most important moments, writing those down, and explaining why they seem important. These may be moments that are marked with tension or conflict, where an event or a character’s action is unusual or unclear, or where the time shifts or the setting changes. This method has the big advantage of both supporting your reading comprehension and also creating strong notes to support your writing later on. Plus, you can combine it with rereading by going back to confusing moments so you can chunk them well, or even by rereading the entire story and chunking as you go.

Playing the “Chunking and Retelling” Game

1. If you are working on a full draft, you can play this game starting with the important moments you have included and analyzed in your essay. If you are early in the writing process and don’t have a draft, review your notes to help refresh your memory on the parts of the story you already understand as well as to identify gaps in your understanding.
2. Create a digital document or work in your notebook and make two columns. Label one “Important Moment” and one “Explanation.”
3. Now, choose a section of the story to reread. If it is a short story, you might choose to start at the beginning and reread the whole thing. If you are working with a longer text, like a novel, you can choose an important or confusing section to reread.
4. As you reread, write down a note summarizing each important moment. Each time you do, write a brief explanation of why you decided the moment was important. Try to make sure you have at least 3-4 moments (chunks) for every 10-15 minutes you spend rereading.

Your notes should look something like this (except you will have more moments and explanations for them):

Important Moment	Explanation
<i>Sarah starts to tell about an event from her past in which she was badly hurt.</i>	This moment is important (and confusing) because the story flashes back into the past for a long section.

5. Once you have at least 3 or 4 moments and explanations written down, try writing a paragraph in which you summarize the section of the story you reread. Writing a summary like this can really help you prove to yourself that you understood the reading and that you can explain the important moments.

Note: this is a great example of a piece of writing that you use to support your thinking process, but it is not something you would typically include in a full draft. In literary arguments, summary is usually kept to a minimum, so a whole paragraph of it wouldn't generally fit. However, like many other types of writing that you might make during the process, it can be very much worth the time you invest in creating it, even if you don't use it in the draft.

Writing It Up

If you are early in the writing process, you can continue to reread, chunk, and retell challenging parts of the story in order to improve your understanding of the reading. You can also use the summaries you create to help you remember the difference between summary and analysis so you can make sure you have the appropriate (small) amount of summary in your draft. When you feel you have a clear understanding of what is happening in the story, make sure you revisit the writing task that you were given. You may find that the question or prompt makes much more sense now. If you are working with a full draft, you can check your summaries against what you have written in your essay, both to be sure your essay expresses a strong understanding of the text and to make sure you have the right (small) amount of summary in your essay.