

comprehend /kəmˈprɪˈhɛnd/

[often with negative] grasp mentally; understand.

'he couldn't comprehend her reasons for marrying Lovat'

[with clause] *'I simply couldn't comprehend what had happened'*

ME: from OF comprehender, or L comprehendere, from com- 'together' + prehendere 'grasp'.

understand /ʌndəˈstænd/

perceive the intended meaning of (words, a language, or a speaker)

'he didn't understand a word I said'

'he could usually make himself understood'

[with clause] *'she understood what he was saying'*

perceive the significance, explanation, or cause of.

'she didn't really understand the situation'

[with clause] *'he couldn't understand why we burst out laughing'*

interpret or view (something) in a particular way.

'as the term is usually understood, legislation refers to regulations and directives'

Understand is the most general and can apply to a range of situations or degrees of perception: *understood the directions; understands only a little spoken Spanish; couldn't understand what I did wrong.*

It can also refer to the thorough knowledge gained by close experience:

"No one who has not had the responsibility can really understand what it is like to be President" (Harry S. Truman).

Comprehend stresses wide or thorough perception:

"To comprehend is to know a thing as well as that thing can be known"
(John Donne).

American Heritage Dictionary

"The light shone in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it."
(John 1:5) - connotations of understand, accept and overcome

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[with clause] *'he couldn't understand why we burst out laughing'*

be sympathetically or knowledgeably aware of the character or nature of.

'Picasso understood colour'

[with clause] *'I understand how you feel'*

appreciate /ə'pri:ʃieɪt//ə'pri:ʃi:ɪt/

understand (a situation) fully; grasp the full implications of.

'they failed to appreciate the pressure he was under'

[with clause] *'I appreciate that you cannot be held totally responsible'*

UNDERSTAND, COMPREHEND, APPRECIATE mean to have a clear or complete idea of. UNDERSTAND and COMPREHEND are very often interchangeable.

UNDERSTAND may, however, stress the fact of having attained a firm mental grasp of something. *orders that were fully understood and promptly obeyed*

COMPREHEND may stress the process of coming to grips with something intellectually. *I have trouble comprehending your reasons for doing this*

APPRECIATE implies a just evaluation or judgment of a thing's value or nature. *failed to appreciate the risks involved*

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Copenhagen

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