

A Close Look at
**CLOSE
READING**

TEACHING STUDENTS TO
ANALYZE COMPLEX TEXTS

GRADES
K-5

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INTRODUCTION

Think about yourself as a reader. How well do you read? What do you read? Why do you read? Are you equally good at reading all types of materials?

Reading proficiency is developed over time. It involves having a purpose for reading and being able to adjust reading behaviors to accomplish that purpose. Inside or outside school, people read for different reasons. Often we read for sheer entertainment. At other times, we read to deeply analyze a position statement, to identify specific information, or to compare how different authors address the same topic. We might also read a text for a combination of reasons or approach it for different purposes at different times.

As Snow (n.d), reminds us, reading comprehension is complicated and multifaceted:

“Getting the gist” or “acquiring new knowledge” is too limited a definition of successful comprehension. In some cases, successful comprehension involves scanning quickly to find the bit of information one wants (as in using the Internet) or reading in order to apply the information immediately but then forget it (as in programming an electronic device). Surely we want to include in our thinking about comprehension the capacity to get absorbed and involved in the text (as when reading a page-turner), as well as reacting critically (as when disagreeing with an editorial). Good readers can do all of these, and can choose when each of these approaches to reading is appropriate. (para. 26)

Learning to become a skilled, purposeful reader requires the support of teachers who know how to create focused, personalized, varied, scaffolded, and motivating learning experiences (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Lapp & Fisher, 2009; Marinak & Gambrell, 2008). Such teachers know when to provide direct instruction, how to guide students’ developing understandings, and when to move to the side to support each student’s growing independence. Their instructional

approach allows students to take ownership for deciding their purpose(s) for reading and for determining if a selected text is helping them accomplish their intention.

To support the development of reading proficiency, it behooves teachers at each grade level to engage students in wide reading experiences that invite the exploration of ideas, issues, and players discussing a myriad of positions on world topics. Texts introduced for different instructional purposes should be both hard copy and digital, including books, documents, magazines, newspapers, tweets, websites, and blogs. Introducing students to a broadened perspective supports the 21st century goal of developing civic, political, financial, scientific, and literary “movers and shakers” who are equipped to make well-informed decisions about their personal and professional lives and who are also aware of how their decisions affect the broader world community. Instruction that opens students’ eyes to the roles they might play in creating global collaboration involves delicately balancing attention to students’ personal interests and motivators with exposure to the great literary, scientific, and historical texts we want them to know, love, and return to often for both pleasure and deepened understanding. In this text, we assert, and reassert through classroom scenarios, that this goal can be accomplished only through focused, systematic instruction from expert grade-level teachers who realize that the way to extend a student’s knowledge is to first focus on what that student already knows and then motivate and challenge him or her to go further.

Although the designers of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects were very clear about the delineation of each college and career readiness anchor standard across the grade levels, they did not prescribe how these standards should be taught. We can, however, infer from the early Common Core documents (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010a) that each teacher is expected to design and implement engaging, relevant, meaningful, continuously assessed, and standards-aligned instruction. The intent of the Common Core is that all students be prepared to fully participate as learners, innovators, collaborators, and communicators in their daily lives. Later in this Introduction and throughout this text we share more explicit discussion of the Common Core’s intentions, both stated and inferred from later NGA Center & CCSSO

documents (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012), and some of the concerns educators have about Common Core–influenced literacy instruction

Reading to Learn Is a Lifelong Process

One means by which the Common Core addresses each student’s preparation for lifelong learning success is through exposure to and close reading and analysis of a wide and increasingly complex array of informational texts. We believe this approach will be effective if it remains in the hands of skilled teachers who understand how to scaffold the instruction of complex texts in ways that support both learner engagement and comprehension. Researchers (Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003; Mohr, 2006; Pappas, 1993) note that, from the earliest years, many children prefer reading informational texts and that doing so prepares them to read for many purposes: to note key details, understand the nuances of carefully selected language, follow the development of ideas, infer author’s perspective and implied information—all with the primary purpose of scrutinizing layers of information to arrive at a careful interpretation and evaluation of an author’s message.

Students do, however, need more than just exposure to texts in order to become proficient readers; they also need the right kind of instruction from excellent teachers. Due to the outstanding work of researcher Jeanne Chall, you might be familiar with the adage that “in K–3 children are *learning to read*, and in 4–12 children are *reading to learn*” (Chall & Jacobs, 2003; Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990); however, educators can hardly stop teaching reading after grade 3. The progression of reading skill development delineated in the Common Core standards underscores that, as students advance through the grade levels, they need systematic, focused, and purposeful instruction in order to develop and refine their analytic skills and comprehend increasingly complex texts in each content area. Richard Vacca (Moss, 2002a) cautions that the “learning to read” and “reading to learn” dichotomy is a false one, and Laura Robb (2002) points out that “what many researchers have now shown is that for all children, learning to read and reading to learn should be happening simultaneously and continuously, from preschool through middle school—and perhaps beyond” (p. 23).

Just how this delicate teaching-and-learning dance occurs as students learn to closely read a text is our focus in the pages to come.

What's Your Latest Experience with Close Reading?

What formal reading instruction did you receive after 3rd grade? For most of us, the answer is “Little.” Yet we have all had the experience of sitting in a classroom and struggling to make sense of the assigned text because we didn’t have the right context for learning the content or we didn’t understand the language.

Teachers can and should challenge students to read increasingly complex texts, but we must remember that as students engage with texts and topics, they do so with variances in language, background knowledge, and reading skills. We must teach and support each student in both learning to read *and* reading to learn widely and deeply across grade levels.

Supporting students’ close reading endeavors involves making a text’s language, content, and structure increasingly accessible through purposeful repeated readings that are accompanied by text-focused conversations and questions that respond to the students’ emerging thinking. These questions should push students back into the text, call their attention to additional aspects of the text’s meaning and workings, and invite additional insights. Teachers who engage students in close reading instruction do so with the goal of making text analysis a habit of practice. Eventually, the students will be able to deploy the process independently whenever they need to find a way to support their comprehension.

What kind of close reading do you engage in outside of a school classroom? Maybe you’re thinking about the other day, when you had to scrutinize the warning label on your new prescription medication. Or about how you pored over the assembly directions for a new piece of furniture or the Google map directions to that new restaurant. Maybe it was your close reading of the fine print on an insurance, health, or employment document or the details of a contract you had to sign. Or when you reviewed certain character descriptions in a novel to prepare for a book club discussion, took a close look at the district’s new testing policy for points to raise at the faculty meeting, or read between the lines of your sister’s e-mail message to try to figure out what she really hopes to get for her birthday. Diane recently had a close reading experience when she gathered with a group of friends to play Mexican Train, a game played with dominoes. As it happened, different players came in with different interpretations of the game’s rules, and eventually, a copy of the official rules was downloaded and printed. For the rest of the evening, whenever a point of contention arose about proper

procedure, these rules were closely read multiple times by multiple players and then collaboratively discussed before play resumed.

As Diane watched and listened, it was obvious to her that the way that the players kept returning to the game's directions (text) to scrutinize the language and the diagrams (structure) was very much like what students do as they return to a text for closer and closer analysis to find author clues and cues that help them understand what is being stated, what is being implied, and what is being left unsaid. Diane realized that she and the other players were not only closely reading the text but also closely reading the situation and one another's tone of voice, word choices, and body language in order to agree on how to proceed.

As we hope this example and your own have clarified, close reading is far from just a "school skill" to be taught and tested as part of Common Core implementation; it's a regular part of daily life. Every day, we and our students are called on to use cues and clues to arrive at reasoned interpretations of both spoken and written language, both inside the classroom and out in the world.

A Preview of the Text Ahead

The Common Core State Standards place close text reading in the spotlight as never before and give special attention to the close reading of informational text. While willing to teach students to engage in close reading of a wide array of texts, both literary (e.g., stories, poetry, drama) and informational, many educators are wondering what, exactly, this involves. Through our own teaching and conversations with our colleagues, we have arrived at one understanding of how to teach students to closely read texts, which we share with you in this publication. In the pages ahead, we use classroom scenarios to address a number of questions:

- What is the process for closely reading a text?
- Is the process of close reading similar across the grades and content areas?
- Why should students learn the process of closely reading a text?
- How can students in grades K–2 engage in closely reading a text when they can't yet read fluently?
- How does close reading align with the other classroom literacy practices—writing, speaking, and listening?
- Can close reading occur within a variety of grouping arrangements?
- How can the background knowledge and language readers need to engage with a text be "backfilled" rather than "frontloaded"?

- How can the complexity of a text be determined?
- What are text-dependent questions, and how do they support close reading?
- How often should students engage in close reading and within what contexts?
- How does formative assessment during close reading support differentiated instruction?
- What do the Common Core assessments that focus on close text reading really measure?

In **Chapter 1**, we tackle the topic of complex texts from multiple vantage points. First, we discuss the factors that make a text complex. Then we offer rubrics for evaluating the complexity of a text. Finally, we model how to use these rubrics to evaluate the complexity of both literature and informational texts. We highlight the fact that what a teacher identifies as the factors of text complexity must be addressed as explicit points of instruction. Identification of these factors depends on the characteristics of each of the students who will be reading the text as well as the features of the text. Using examples, we illustrate how both primary and intermediate grade teachers use the text complexity rubrics to identify the teaching points they will need to address if their students are to have successful close text reading experiences with both literary and informational texts. Many of the texts selected as examples are from Appendix B of the Common Core State Standards for ELA/literacy, which provides exemplars of grade-level texts.

In **Chapter 2**, we focus on the reader and how information is processed during close reading. We also look at the process of close reading and the comprehension benefits it brings. The differences between shared and close reading practice and instruction, along with ideas about how often to engage students in close reading, are also addressed.

In **Chapter 3**, we discuss the practical tasks of planning, implementing, and managing close reading instruction. Using illustrations from both primary and intermediate classrooms, we look at how to do the following:

- Identify initial teaching points for a close reading
- Create effective text-dependent questions
- Prepare a text for a close reading
- Model text annotation and close reading
- Support students as they engage in close text reading
- Revise teaching points during a close reading
- Integrate close reading as a part of the school day

- Design various grouping configurations to support close reading
- Support English language learners and striving readers
- Use sentence frames to support academic language use during close reading conversations
- Differentiate instruction and instructional supports

We have been mindful to make these composite classrooms in our scenarios diverse—reflective of today’s typical school environments, where students are likely to present a variety of linguistic, cultural, and academic differences. We are also careful to show how the identified strategies can be scaffolded to support the learning of all of these children.

Chapter 4 describes disciplinary literacy and then shares why close reading should be a component of learning in each of the disciplines. Noting that texts are classified by the Common Core standards as *narrative*, *informational*, *persuasive/argumentative*, and *additional forms*, we discuss the characteristics of each and offer justifications to clarify why there has been so much emphasis of late on reading informational texts, both in digital and print forms. We compare the Common Core’s text exemplars and other texts, and we include a chart to provide an easy reference of informational texts across grade levels and disciplines. We also discuss how the development of close reading skills might progress within each discipline under the guidance of an expert teacher.

Engaging in a close reading involves communication through speaking, listening, and also writing. **Chapter 5** identifies the language, speaking and listening, and writing standards within the Common Core that support close reading experiences. We share examples of instructional routines that develop these literacies, paying special attention to the skill development associated with Writing Standard 1 (CCRA.W.1), in which students first state opinions, then support those opinions with data, and finally, by the time they arrive in 6th grade, are ready to take a stance and pose an argument. We share sentence frames that support the development of language students need to state opinions and make arguments. All of the instructional scenarios in this chapter illustrate the need to continually strengthen the language abilities of all students so they are able to engage in collaborative, student-to-student conversations about the texts they are closely reading and use the information learned from a close reading to support the stances they will later share through their written and spoken positions.