Why Reading for Meaning?

This section serves as an introductory tutorial on the Reading for Meaning strategy. In this section, our goals are to help you reflect on your current approach to building students’ comprehension skills in your classroom and to explain the Strategic Teacher approach to Reading for Meaning.

In this section you will

- Reflect on your own experiences with reading comprehension strategies.
- Explore the research, principles, and classroom phases that make Reading for Meaning such a powerful strategy for building students’ reading and reasoning skills.
- Examine a range of student work and classroom applications that demonstrate the different ways Reading for Meaning can be used to deepen student thinking and build comprehension.
- Experience a model lesson using the Reading for Meaning strategy.
Let’s Get Started

Adults tend to forget just how challenging the act of making meaning out of the words on a page can be. Thus, we begin this Strategic Teacher PLC Guide on Reading for Meaning with a few short texts that can put us in better touch with the challenges that many of our students face as readers. We deliberately selected these texts as reminders that understanding what we read is not always a snap. We call the following five texts “An Anthology of Rigorous Readings.” Preview all of the readings and then pick two for close reading—the one you believe will be the most challenging, and the one you believe will be the least challenging.

An Anthology of Rigorous Readings

Reading One:

Excerpt from the Federalist Papers, “Concerning the General Power of Taxation,” by Alexander Hamilton

It has been already observed that the federal government ought to possess the power of providing for the support of the national forces; in which proposition was intended to be included the expense of raising troops, of building and equipping fleets, and all other expenses in any wise connected with military arrangements and operations. But these are not the only objects to which the jurisdiction of the Union, in respect to revenue, must necessarily be empowered to extend. It must embrace a provision for the support of the national civil list; for the payment of the national debts contracted, or that may be contracted; and, in general, for all those matters which will call for disbursements out of the national treasury. The conclusion is, that there must be interwoven, in the frame of the government, a general power of taxation, in one shape or another.

Reading Two:

“There’s a certain Slant of light,” by Emily Dickinson

There’s a certain Slant of light,  
Winter Afternoons —  
That oppresses, like the Heft  
Of Cathedral Tunes —

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us —  
We can find no scar,  
But internal difference,  
Where the Meanings, are —

None may teach it — Any —  
’Tis the Seal Despair —  
An imperial affliction  
Sent us of the Air —

When it comes, the Landscape listens —  
Shadows — hold their breath —  
When it goes, ’tis like the Distance  
On the look of Death —
Reading Three:
A Description of the Healing Process Adapted from a High School Biology Textbook

Endothelial cells bud and grow from existing blood vessels, undergo canalization, and form a vascular network by connecting to other cell buds. New vessels are all similar in appearance, with thin walls made of endothelium. Protein leaks out of the vessels, bathing the wound area in plasma and providing a rich nutrient medium that promotes rapid cell growth. Once this nutrient medium is established, differentiation can begin. Some vessels will become venules, which are large and have thin walls, while others will become arterioles, which have muscular coats. As granulation tissue steadily changes, some vessels will disappear. Those that remain will become part of the capillary bed.

Reading Four:
Excerpt from The Souls of Black Folk, by W. E. B. Du Bois

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.

Reading Five:
What Is the Hailstone Sequence? Exploring a Mathematical Mystery

One mystery that has puzzled mathematicians for years is a strange series of numbers known as a hailstone sequence. To create a hailstone sequence, take any positive integer $n$. If $n$ is even, divide it by 2. If $n$ is odd, multiply it by 3 and add 1. Then, take the result and repeat the process over and over to generate a sequence of numbers. If we apply this procedure to $n = 11$, we get: 34, 17, 52, 26, 13, 40, 20, 10, 5, 16, 8, 4, 2, 1, 4, 2, 1... These sequences are called hailstone sequences because the numbers mimic the up-and-down movement of hailstones as they form in clouds.

Notice that the sequence above ends in a repeating pattern—4, 2, 1, 4, 2, 1... It is believed that every value for $n$ will settle into this 4, 2, 1 pattern. But some values generate long sequences before the pattern emerges. For example, $n = 27$ yields 109 numbers before the 4, 2, 1 pattern begins. So what’s the mystery? No mathematician has yet proven that every positive integer will generate a sequence that eventually settles into a repeating 4, 2, 1 pattern.
Activity: Thinking About the Skills of Comprehension

1. How did the skills you checked off help you understand the texts you read?

2. What are some ways you teach these skills in your classroom?

3. What are some of the recurring challenges you face in helping students build their reading and reasoning skills?

What Is a Proficient Reader?

So what is a proficient reader? The first answer is—if you checked off several of the skills from the list on page 8—you. Proficient readers use a set of skills to help them derive meaning from even the most difficult texts, a set of skills that has much in common with the list on page 8. What’s noteworthy about this list of reading and thinking skills is how it came to be. How do we know that proficient readers use these skills to build their understanding?