

A photograph of a person's feet standing on a dark grey mat next to a blue pool. A large, solid green circle is overlaid on the upper portion of the image, containing the title and subtitle text.

Diving In

HELP STUDENTS GET TO THE
BOTTOM OF CLOSE READING
AND COMPLEX TEXTS.

By Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey

The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts have prompted transformative discussions across the profession—even in states that have not formally adopted them. Perhaps nowhere is this truer than in elementary reading instruction. Literacy educators and researchers are gaining new insights into young children’s capacity to handle complex texts, without sacrificing developmental reading processes. This means that teachers are expanding children’s literary diets to include a healthy portion of complex texts, which requires new approaches to instruction. As teachers add new methods to their teaching repertoire, principals play a vital role in supporting them.

Expanding the reading diet to include more complex texts, however, will not succeed if all else remains the same. Continuing with “one-and-done” reading won’t ensure that students deeply understand complex texts. Unfortunately, that has been a common practice in the past. Think about a conventional lesson you’ve seen involving text. Students first experience extensive teacher talk in the form of frontloading content and pre-teaching vocabulary before ever reading the text. After they have read it a single time, students are then asked to complete a series of questions to be answered on their own. This structure simply does not provide students with an opportunity to deeply explore—and understand—complex texts in the company of their teacher and peers. No wonder most students view such isolating work as drudgery.

But what if the lesson included extensive, meaningful interaction? On a regular basis (several times throughout the week), students should read closely to mine texts for their deeper meanings. But without guidance, many students will fail to acquire such analytical skills on their own. Thus, students should be taught to read closely.

As noted in the Common Core State Standards, students should, “Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.” But this practice should occur irrespective of whether teaching and learning is governed by the Common Core. Close reading is an effective approach that can be added to your school’s comprehensive literacy instructional effort.

In *Implementing the Common Core State Standards: A Primer on “Close Reading of Text,”* Sheila Brown and Lee Kappes define close reading as, “an investigation of a short piece of text, with multiple readings done over multiple instructional lessons. Through text-based questions and discussion, students are guided to deeply analyze and appreciate various aspects of the text, such as key vocabulary and how its meaning is shaped by context; attention to form, tone, imagery and/or rhetorical devices; the significance of word choice and syntax; and the discovery of different levels of meaning as passages are read multiple times.”

Principals should look for several key features of close reading in class-

rooms. As you observe close reading lessons, ask yourself and the teacher these reflective questions that can promote strong instructional practices: Why was this text selected? How do students make note of their thinking? How are text-dependent questions used to foster critical thinking? How are readers inspired?

Why Was This Text Selected?

First and foremost, the text should be complex and worthy of analysis. Not all texts need, much less deserve, close reading. If the meaning of the text is obvious, there is no reason to read it closely. Ideally, texts chosen for close reading have multiple levels of meaning, are age-appropriate, and can withstand scrutiny and investigation.

This requires more than a simple examination of the quantitative level of text complexity. A Lexile level, for example, can inform a teacher that a text is complex, but not *why* that text is complex. Teachers have to consider the qualitative aspects of text complexity. The Qualitative Factors of Text Complexity chart on the next page contains a list of various aspects of qualitative text complexity that can be used to determine whether a text is worthy of close reading. When texts are complex in specific aspects, teachers can align instruction and questions around those factors. As you talk

with teachers about their rationale for selecting a given text, ask how the identified qualitative factors of textual complexity are evidenced in their modeling and questioning.

How Do Students Make Note of Their Thinking?

In addition to proper text selection, close reading requires that students read, and re-read, the text. As they do so, students should mark the text. We have found that there are three foundational annotation skills that students can use across grades and subject areas:

1. Underline central ideas. This requires a great deal of instruction and feedback as students learn to locate main ideas in a text, making distinctions between supporting details and more important information.

2. Circle words and phrases that are confusing. In addition to serving as a good source of information for teachers, having students recognize unfamiliar words and phrases helps them learn to monitor their understanding.

3. Write margin notes, in your own words. These short phrases allow students to summarize and synthesize their understanding of the text. This is also great information for the teacher to check for understanding.

Many schools have adopted a simple process for annotating so that students have a consistent system to rely upon, year after year. If your school does not, start a discussion with faculty about a schoolwide annotation process, and demonstrate the annotation process in front of staff so that they can see the value of marking a text.

How Are Questions Used to Foster Critical Thinking?

The annotations will help ensure that students re-read the text, but sometimes they will need reminders and prompts. The key to close reading is the specificity of questions that teachers and students ask about the text. These questions provide fodder for student conversations, where the

meaning of the text is more likely to be unlocked.

We use phases of guiding questions to focus the content of the questions because students may need to read a text three times to get the general understanding, or they may only need to read it once to be ready to move on. The overarching questions we use to plan close reading lessons are:

- What does the text say? (Phase 1)
- How does the text work? (Phase 2)
- What does the text mean? (Phase 3)
- What does the text inspire you to do? (Phase 4)

The starting place for a close reading lesson is the literal level. The questions in this first phase focus on general understandings and key details, such as the author's message and where the story takes place.

Text-dependent questions should be used to facilitate student-to-student interactions and to enable teachers to check for understanding. Teachers should remain in Phase 1 as long as necessary, but move out of this phase as quickly as possible. Teachers need to look over students' shoulders to evaluate their annotations and listen in on collaborative conversations to determine when they can move to the second phase.

In Phase 2, the focus becomes structural. After students understand the literal level, they can begin to evaluate words and phrases, the text structures that guide the flow of text, and the author's craft such as genre, narration, and literary devices. These questions push readers further into the text as they explore the internal workings of the text, gaining even deeper understanding. Again, teachers should listen carefully to the collaborative conversations and notice students' annotations to determine when students are ready to move to the inferential level.

At the outset of the close reading, the focus was on the explicit meaning. By Phase 3, students are ready to explore the implicit meaning of

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➤ Achieve the Core is a non-profit organization established by the chief architects of the CCSS. Its website offers tools such as turnkey PD resources, CCSS-aligned lessons using readings featured in existing basals, and **leadership tools for working with parents and faculty.**

➤ The Fisher and Frey Channel on YouTube features many **video lessons of close reading** in elementary classrooms, as well as other examples of quality instruction.

Qualitative Factors of Text Complexity

COMPONENT	ASPECTS	WHEN A TEXT IS COMPLEX . . .
Levels of Meaning and Purpose	Density and complexity	There are multiple levels of meaning, some of which are not clearly stated.
	Figurative language	There are many literary devices (e.g., metaphors, personification) or devices that the reader is not familiar with (e.g., symbolism, irony), as well as idioms or clichés.
	Purpose	Either the purpose is not stated, or is purposefully withheld. The reader has to determine the theme or message.
Structure	Genre	The genre is unfamiliar or the author bends the rules of the genre.
	Organization	It does not follow traditional structures such as problem/solution, cause/effect, compare/contrast, sequence or chronology, or feature rich descriptions.
	Narration	The narrator is unreliable, changes during the course of the text, or has a limited perspective for the reader.
	Text features	Features fewer signposts such as headings, bold words, margin notes, font changes, or footnotes.
	Graphics	Visual information is not repeated in the text itself, but the graphics or illustrations are essential to understanding the main ideas.
Language Conventinality and Clarity	Standard English and variations	Variations of standard English, such as regional dialects or vernaculars with which the reader is not familiar, are included.
	Register	It is archaic, formal, scholarly, or fixed in time.
Knowledge Demands	Background knowledge	The demands on the reader extend well beyond his or her personal life experience.
	Prior knowledge	The demands on the reader extend well beyond what he or she has been formally taught in school.
	Cultural knowledge	The demands on the reader extend well beyond his or her cultural experiences and may include references to archaic or historical cultures.
	Vocabulary	The words used are representations of complex ideas that are unfamiliar to the reader, or they are domain-specific and not easily understood using context clues or morphological knowledge.

SOURCE: Frey, N., & Fisher, D. (2013). *Rigorous reading: 5 access points for comprehending complex texts*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin. Used with permission.

That's what
close reading
is all about:
deeply
understanding
a text and
then doing
something
with it.

the text, make logical inferences, and make comparisons with other texts. The content of the questions in this phase focuses on inferences as well as cross-text comparisons and the opinions and arguments that are plausible based on the text. Students should be able to provide evidence for their responses and draw conclusions from the text.

This is the phase that teachers want to get to: understanding. But, it's not fair to put a complex text in front of students and immediately start interrogating them about inferences and arguments. Instead, these phases provide scaffolding for students. Over time, and with a lot of practice, they will start to read texts in this way. Only then are they really ready to read complex texts on their own.

As you debrief with a teacher after a lesson, ask how he or she used the sequence of questions to foster understanding about the qualitative elements identified as being complex. For example, if the piece contained a challenging literacy device, what text-dependent questions caused students to consider the device more carefully? Inquire as well as to any unexpected stumbling blocks encountered during the lesson.

Complex texts require that students wrestle a bit more with ideas, and the road to critical thinking is rarely a smooth one. Be sure to encourage the teacher to celebrate when his or her students struggle a bit. It's a sign that some real thinking has occurred.

And finally, consider the tasks that teachers invite students to complete once they have read and understood the text. Texts should inspire readers, not just be passively consumed by them.

How Are Readers Inspired?

Students have read a text deeply and have developed an understanding of that text. Now what? There are numerous possibilities, ranging from writing activities to debates to presentations to investigation to tests. Sometimes, the whole class may be expected to complete the same task following the close reading, at other times, students

should be able to propose to their teachers a course of action based on what they gained from the text and what questions still remain.

That's what close reading is all about: deeply understanding a text and then doing something with it—such as reading other texts by the same author, debating the merits of a character's decision, or further investigating a burning discussion question. Let's not rob students of these experiences by telling them too much in advance. Let's not remove the need to actually read the text. And, even more important, let's make sure that students develop the habit of returning to the text to examine it carefully.

By asking teachers reflective questions about their close reading practices, they are better able to develop future lessons that inspire readers to think and act critically. These conversations are vital to fostering teachers' confidence about a new instructional routine. When you engage in thoughtful discussions with teachers, they recognize the collaborative nature of your professional support, even when the focus is on resolving a problem of practice.

Close reading, using text-dependent questions to guide collaborative conversations, can provide students with access to complex texts. Texts that would have been considered out of students' reach in the past can be made accessible when systematic questioning is used to support comprehension. Your reflective questions with teachers fulfill a similar function: this helps them to gain confidence in using complex texts thoughtfully, and inspires teachers to take action based on their understanding and appreciation of diverse texts. 

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