The Habits of Close Reading
Renewing our focus on the essential skills for comprehension

A position paper describing the important role of close reading in the Common Core State Standards, with strategies to support close reading in the classroom.

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Similarly, if we examine the concept of close reading, we can see that there is really nothing new. Close reading in fact matches what the enterprise of reading has always been—the use of a collection of comprehension strategies that help students talk and think about text at deeper and deeper levels of understanding.

Students have always had to read closely in order to understand complex texts, and teachers of English literature in secondary schools and universities have, for many years, employed close or analytic readings to unpack the hidden meaning in challenging literary texts (Richards, 1929; Fisher & Frey, 2012; Frey & Fisher, 2013).

However, today much noise and confusion surrounds the implementation of close reading in schools, as definitions, purposes, and practices abound. Unsurprisingly, many teachers and administrators are confused by the call for close reading in the Common Core State Standards and other standards like them. But they can take heart. Although close reading is figured prominently in the new standards, it is not new and is in fact familiar to most educators.

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“Close reading in fact matches what the enterprise of reading has always been—the use of a collection of comprehension strategies that help students talk and think about text at deeper and deeper levels of understanding.”
Defining Close Reading

Close reading involves the use of a collection of evidence-based comprehension strategies embedded in teacher-guided discussions, planned around repeated readings of a text in order to increase student comprehension. Close reading can be defined simply as repeated readings and discussions of text in order to increase text comprehension.

Educators must also understand what close reading is not. Sometimes teachers and students think that close reading means focusing in on or magnifying the importance of increasingly smaller or more literal elements of the text, similar to using a microscope to examine something too small to be seen with the naked eye. Many reading researchers and scholars fear that close reading will be interpreted incorrectly in this way (Pearson, 2014).

In actuality, close reading implies an ordered process that proceeds from understanding the smallest or most literal ideas in text (word, phrase, and sentence meanings) to understanding larger ideas (paragraphs and sections) to understanding the organization of ideas (coherence, structure, and craft) to integrating text information with background knowledge to interpret what the text means.

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Close reading is required in the ELA (K–12) reading standards. This requirement is an important reason to implement close reading consistently in today’s classrooms, but it is not the most important reason. Close reading is an uber-strategy that helps students to independently comprehend increasingly challenging texts. Students need to develop the habits of mind and the skills necessary to unpack the deep, embedded meanings found in complex, challenging texts, in order to become college and career ready.

Close reading is NOT:

- starting with the big ideas
- and moving to the details

Close reading IS:

- starting with the details
- and moving to the big ideas
Close reading is intended to develop the reading habits that students need for college and careers, described in Anchor Standard 1 in the Common Core ELA (K–12) State Standards, which states that students are expected to:

- Read closely to **determine what the text says** explicitly
- Make **logical inferences** from their interactions with text
- **Cite specific textual evidence** when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text

The theoretical and research literature on reading comprehension supports the importance of developing these three habits of mind through close reading (Duke, Pearson, Strachan, & Billman, 2011; Kintsch, 2013; Wilkinson & Sun, 2011).

**Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly**

Reading to determine what the text actually says, as required in the standards, is an essential reading habit that supports initial text comprehension. In practice, this means that the first close reading lessons should focus on determining what the text says, rather than on front-loading information for students by spending too much time on accessing, activating, or building their background knowledge.

Students can be briefly reminded to activate their background knowledge about a topic or theme in the text, but this practice should not replace a focus on determining what the text itself has to offer. Students and teachers should value the text as a rich evidentiary base to be used in constructing knowledge and meaning (Pearson, 2014).

Teachers should not think of text as an obstacle that needs to be overcome by front-loading information for students prior to reading. If students become too dependent on teachers providing information to fill in knowledge gaps that the text could provide, they will not develop the close reading habits needed to build their own background knowledge independently from the text. According to Pearson (2013), “As a profession we have overindulged at the trough of prior knowledge, [but] the remedy is to balance its role, not eliminate it.”
Make logical inferences from interactions with text

Then, as required by the standards, students need to learn how to make logical inferences from information provided in the text. It is important to remember that ideas are located at different levels. Some are local to a specific section, and readers need to understand how ideas in words, sentences, and phrases connect to one another. Others are more global and spread out, and readers need to understand how ideas in paragraphs and sections are crafted and structured.

It can help to teach students that the number of types of local inferences that any text might require is finite (Johnson & Johnson, 1986). Research shows that systematic instruction of the ten local inference types (shown to the right) significantly improved third-grade students’ abilities to make inferences from text (Reutzel & Hollingsworth, 1988).

When reading a text closely, students also need to learn how to make global inferences to determine the text’s organization or structure. Helping students reread to improve this skill is critically important for improving text comprehension. Without recognizing and using text structure, readers often fail to identify the importance of key ideas represented in informational texts or recognize how the key ideas fit together (Alexander & Jetton, 2000).

In addition, the text structure of narratives differs from the text structure of informational texts. Narrative texts typically follow a story’s grammar or structure, with characters, a setting (location and time), a problem, a plan or goal, attempts to solve the problem, and a resolution (Stein & Glenn, 1979; Mandler & Johnson, 1977). Informational texts, in contrast, can use several text organizations individually or in combination, including description, compare-contrast, problem-solution, cause-effect, or sequential-procedural (Shanahan et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2007, 2009).

10 Types of Local Inferences

- **Location or Place:** Where are we?
- **Agent or Actors:** Who did it?
- **Time:** When did it happen?
- **Action:** What is happening?
- **Instrument:** What tool or device was used to accomplish what is happening?
- **Category:** What other events is this an example of?
- **Object:** What person, place, thing, or idea was used?
- **Cause/Effect:** What caused this to happen?
- **Problem/Solution:** How did they solve their problem?
- **Feelings/Attitude:** How did this make you or someone else in the text feel?
When texts do not present readers with an inferable text structure or organization, students need to be taught how to impose a structure or organization on a text to aid their comprehension and ability to identify key ideas (Graesser, 2007; Kintsch & Kintsch, 2005). Helping students re-represent the author’s structure or organization visually using graphic organizers has been shown to be highly effective (National Reading Panel, 2000). Some examples of graphic organizers are on the right.

**Cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text**

The final set of close reading skills or habits required by the standards calls for students to use evidence from the text, in both writing and speaking, to support their interpretations of the meaning and their conclusions. To help students cite specific evidence, teachers typically teach the following comprehension strategies:

- Answering text-dependent **questions**
- **Teacher-guided discussion/dialog** around the text
- Text **annotation**

The figure below shows an example of each using the familiar tale of the *Three Little Pigs*.

### Citing Text Evidence to Support Conclusions Drawn From Text

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Text-Dependent Question</strong></th>
<th><strong>Why did the wolf think he could blow down the third little pig’s house made of brick?</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher-Guided Discussion/Dialog</strong></td>
<td><strong>Why did the first two little pigs run to the third little pig’s house? Let’s retell the story to our neighbor to start. As you retell, be thinking about the answer to our question. When each of you has retold the story to your neighbor, share your answer using the text to defend your answer (think-pair-share). Then we’ll get back together as a class to discuss the answer to our big question.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Annotation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Then the wolf was very angry indeed, and declared he would eat up the little pig, and that he would get down the chimney after him.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For optimal results from close readings of text, students need to write and speak about what they have learned. They need to combine this learning with their background knowledge, link the new information to similar texts they have read, and merge the new knowledge acquired from the text into their existing network of knowledge.

This can be accomplished through a variety of evidence-based and engaging learning activities. This can include oral presentations using digital technologies and writing activities, which can include text summaries, graphic novels about the text, newspaper stories about the text, and magazine reviews of a story about the text. The figure below illustrates the reading habits of mind students develop during close readings of text.

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**Reading Habits of Mind Developed During Close Readings of Text**
Tips for School Administrators and Literacy Coaches

To help classroom teachers successfully implement close reading embedded in standards-based reading instruction, school administrators and literacy coaches must work together to provide teachers with the necessary understanding, materials, conditions, and support.

Tips for school leaders include:

- Build teachers’ capacity to select texts appropriate for use in close readings.

- Help teachers and students understand the rationale for repeatedly reading a text for multiple comprehension purposes.

- Provide professional development so that teachers can master how to teach a set of comprehension strategies to construct, analyze, and integrate text understandings at deeper and deeper levels of comprehension.

Build teachers’ capacity to select texts for appropriate use in close readings

Not all texts are appropriate for close reading. Some are straightforward, clearly written, and well organized, with content that is explicitly stated and not difficult to understand. These texts are typically not appropriate for close reading.

Other texts that strive to convey complex content are more suitable. These texts often conceal meaning beneath layers of rare words, complex sentence structures, missing connecting terms, atypical paragraph organization, few or missing text features that help signal text structure, mixed or multiple text structures, and the use of literary devices such as metaphor and flashbacks.

Criteria of texts that are worthy of close reading:

- **Contain content** that is compelling, accurate, and of interest to readers.

- **Are challenging** and don’t give up their meaning easily via skimming, scanning, or casual reading.

- **Tend to be relatively short** in length (Frey & Fisher, 2013).

- **Are selected from a range of genres** such as newspaper articles, journals, encyclopedia articles, novels, tall tales, and almanacs.

- **Represent different text structures** and contain a variety of features such as tables of contents, glossaries, indices, headings, as well as different language constructions.
Help teachers and students understand the importance of repeated readings

Complex texts require that students unpack layers or levels of meaning. Theoretically grounded reading comprehension instruction recognizes this fact and acknowledges that text comprehension is a multi-leveled process (Kintsch, 2013). Consequently, complex texts require repeated readings to peel back multiple layers of meaning. Shanahan (2013) suggests that close readings should address at least three levels of text comprehension:

- What does the text say?
- How does the text work?
- What does the text mean?

Provide professional development

Close reading of texts for multiple comprehension purposes requires that students learn to use a set of multiple comprehension strategies that teachers can practice in professional development sessions themselves.

To help students unpack what a text says, teachers can practice showing students how to figure out unfamiliar word meanings, link terms that signal relationships among ideas, and answer text-dependent questions from specific places within a text. They can practice helping students peel back additional layers of text meaning and show them how to use text features like headings, subheadings, captions, glossaries, indices, metaphorical language in addition to determining or imposing a structure on the text using graphic organizers. Finally, teachers can practice helping students learn how to monitor their text understanding, retell, discuss, write, and summarize text.

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Conclusion

Taken together, a set of strategies used with close readings for differing comprehension purposes has been shown to help readers of all ages, even those in primary grades (Reutzel, Smith, & Fawson, 2005).

Teachers who help students integrate what they learn from multiple or repeated close readings of text also help students increase their knowledge of the world. In doing so, they create an ongoing and self-sustaining virtuous comprehension cycle, where knowledge begets comprehension and comprehension begets knowledge in the life of every student (Duke, Pearson, Strachan, & Billman, 2011).
References


Andersen, H. C. (1837). *The Emperor’s New Clothes*. Copenhagen, Denmark: C. A. Reitzel Publisher.


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