

Implementing the Common Core State Standards: A Primer on “Close Reading of Text”

By Sheila Brown and Lee Kappes

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Introduction

The Common Core State Standards represent an ambitious effort to improve teaching and learning at an unprecedented scale. Adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia, these standards are an attempt to dramatically change what students and teachers do in school, by redefining high-level, thought-provoking instruction as the norm for all students in all schools. The Common Core emphasizes students' independence and perseverance in solving complex problems, their ability to marshal relevant evidence to construct sound arguments, and their ability to communicate ideas and analyses through speaking and writing. Since the Common Core was adopted, educators have been grappling with the enormous shifts the standards demand in terms of instructional practice, curriculum development, the selection of aligned instructional materials, and professional development.

Among the most significant of the shifts in English language arts is the expectation that all students will be able to read increasingly complex texts proficiently and independently. The ten anchor standards for reading are bookended by a specific focus on Close Reading of complex text:

- 1. 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.***
- 10. Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.ⁱ***

This focus is repeated throughout the English language arts standards and the literacy standards in the content areas, including the writing standards, which emphasize the ability to draw specific evidence from text in supporting claims and arguments.

These expectations create a significant challenge, as schools at all levels have paid insufficient attention to the development of students' reading comprehension as they progress through increasingly complex texts. This challenge is exacerbated by the readability levels of high school texts, which have trended downward in difficulty, while the readability levels of college texts have increased.ⁱⁱ In 2006, the average reading level of college texts was 350 Lexile levels higher than those at the end of high school—which represents more than a third of the entire reading-level range from second through 12th grade.ⁱⁱⁱ

To prepare students for the rigors of college and careers, then, schools must place a greater emphasis on the teaching of increasingly complex texts. There is a dispute, however, among researchers and practitioner-leaders on the role of the Close Reading strategy in achieving this goal, including the extent to which teachers should assist students with background knowledge in order to help them construct meaning of the text.

Experts in the reading research and broader practitioner communities have offered what appear to be divergent perspectives on the kinds of instructional practices that facilitate the development of the deep comprehension called for in the standards. Early training and messaging by some organizations suggested that Close Reading eliminated the privilege of background knowledge and that pre-reading

strategies were to be excised from Close Reading lessons. Other experts questioned these recommendations, pointing out that readers *always* use background knowledge of the world, along with knowledge of how language and text work, to build a coherent representation of what the text says.

Some researchers and advocates expressed concern that recommendations to minimize the role of prior knowledge will widen the gap between poor and proficient readers.^{iv}

There is a substantial body of research that should not be ignored in making decisions about the use of the Close Reading strategy. Readers' background knowledge always shapes comprehension, allowing them to combine new information with what they already know to construct new knowledge. What readers bring to a text defines what they can

take from it— there is no eliminating the advantage that greater background knowledge confers.

We also know from experience, however, that many students are not taught how to read appropriately complex text independently and with precision. The Common Core explicitly describes a set of reading and analytic abilities that can only be developed through regular practice and feedback, such as by interpreting words and phrases as they are used in a text, analyzing the structure of text, and explaining how an author reasons and uses evidence. The Common Core expects—and equity demands—that *all* students have the chance to productively struggle with complex texts. Especially for students with lower reading skills and gaps in background knowledge, Close Reading can be an important strategy to accelerate and deepen their own learning.

Teachers need to know *when* and *how* to make use of Close Reading in strengthening students' read-

ing, furthering students' independence, and deepening their reading comprehension.

To assist teachers in understanding and employing Close Reading, this primer addresses the following key questions:

- 1) What is Close Reading of text, and what are its essential attributes? How, and for what purposes, should teachers employ this strategy?
- 2) What is the role of background knowledge in the development of reading comprehension, and when should teachers activate and/or provide background knowledge?
- 3) What should teachers and district leaders consider about Close Reading as they prepare to implement it in practice?

Close Reading Defined

Definition: Close Reading of text involves 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. The teacher's goal in the use of Close Reading is to gradually release responsibility to students—moving from an environment where the teacher models for students the strategies to one where students employ the strategies on their own when they read independently.^v

Close Reading does more than advance reading development; it is a mechanism for teaching about logical arguments and critiquing the reasoning of others, for gleaning evidence from text and applying critical thinking skills. Close Reading is as much a way of thinking and processing text that is emphasized throughout the Common Core as it is about a way of reading a singular piece of text. Close Reading cannot be reserved for students who already are strong readers; it should be a vehicle through which all students grapple with advanced concepts and participate in engaging discussions regardless of their independent reading level.

The Common Core expects—and equity demands—that all students have the chance to productively struggle with complex texts. Especially for students with lower reading skills and gaps in background knowledge, Close Reading can be an important strategy to accelerate and deepen their own learning.

Attributes of Close Reading Lessons

Close Reading strategies will vary depending on the content under consideration, the place in the curriculum, and the goals of the particular lesson. But most Close Reading lessons will share the following attributes:

1. **Selection of a brief, high-quality, complex text.** Limiting the length of the passage allows students the opportunity to apply new skills and strategies through multiple readings of the text.
2. **Individual reading of the text.** Students unable to read the text independently might engage in a partner read or a group read in lieu of an independent attempt.
3. **Group reading aloud.** A group read aloud might be teacher- or student-led. This practice supports the engagement of all students, especially those who struggle with reading the text independently, and reinforces the primacy of the text throughout Close Reading lessons.
4. **Text-based questions and discussion that focus on discrete elements of the text.** Questions and discussion may focus on the author's word choices and repetition, specific sentences, literary devices, academic vocabulary, or particular passages containing information that is key to the curricular objective.
5. **Discussion among students.** These discussions, either in small groups or across the whole class, will ensure that the text—as opposed to personal reflections—remains the focus as the reader explores the author's choices.
6. **Writing about the text.** Students may be asked to reflect on the knowledge gained through Close Reading in short or long written passages.

Background Knowledge and Close Reading

Part of the debate about the use of Close Reading as an instructional strategy is the role of background knowledge in the process, and when background knowledge should be constructed. Research establishes a reciprocal relationship between background knowledge and comprehension—an individual with significant knowledge about a topic uses that knowledge to build a coherent representation of what the text says. A knowledgeable reader

needs only to update his or her preexisting situation model with new information presented in the text, while a reader who lacks background knowledge on the topic of the text is less able to build an accurate representation of what the text means.^{vi} Fortunately, teachers can teach less skilled readers what they need to become skilled readers, beginning with building disciplinary and world knowledge.^{vii} Teachers need to know their students well in order to gauge how much background knowledge students have (or don't have) and the extent to which background knowledge should be provided to ensure they are able to comprehend the text.

Previewing the content of the text undermines the value of a Close Reading exercise.

For the purposes of Close Reading, it is essential to distinguish between the background knowledge that is required to understand the text and the knowledge sought to be gained from reading the text. Teachers should ensure their students have enough context and background knowledge to access the text, either through prior instruction and/or pre-reading activities. That said, previewing the content of the text undermines the value of a Close Reading exercise. If a teacher feels the need to deliver content from the text rather than allow students to discover the content independently and through text-dependent questions and discussion, then either the text is not appropriate for a Close Reading lesson or the teacher does not believe his/her students are ready for the rigor that Close Reading of complex text demands. While teachers need to exercise discretion in the selection of texts and related instructional practices, it is essential that all students engage in Close Reading of complex texts that meet grade-level expectations established by the Common Core.

Additional Considerations When Implementing Close Reading in Practice

- ***Close Reading, as a multifaceted strategy for teaching reading, should be situated within a broader, comprehensive literacy framework.***

The teaching of reading is a complex, multilayered effort that requires the orchestration of a myriad of intentional instructional decisions and a variety of

instructional techniques. Close Reading of text is one important strategy for fostering independence and analytic skills.

The Common Core standards demand coordination across subjects and grades to ensure that text used for instruction progresses in complexity over the course of years, develops content knowledge coherently across academic disciplines and grades, and balances literary and informational text, such that informational text comprises the majority of reading in later grades. The coherence and coordination required underscores the need for a well-defined approach to literacy instruction. Organized around the gradual release of responsibility, a comprehensive literacy framework serves as a road map to assure teachers provide all students opportunities for the modeling, guided practice, and independent practice necessary to acquire the new and higher-level skills that will allow them to master grade-level text. Comprehensive literacy frameworks create a common, consistent approach to specific instructional configurations, strategies, time expectations, and materials to be used in literacy instruction.

In the context of a comprehensive literacy framework, Close Reading is an instructional strategy that provides modeling and guided practice of the skills and strategies needed to independently read increasingly complex text and apply newly acquired knowledge in text-based demonstrations of deep understanding.

- ***Close Reading of text is not only, or even primarily, an English language arts strategy. It can be an effective strategy for deepening content knowledge and learning to read like an expert in all academic disciplines.***

The Common Core State Standards “insist that instruction in reading, writing, speaking, listening and language be a shared responsibility in a school. This interdisciplinary approach to literacy is supported by extensive research establishing the need for college and career ready students to be proficient in reading complex informational text independently in a variety of content areas.”^{viii} As this statement makes clear, it is the job of every teacher—no matter the grade level or subject area—to teach all students the reading and writing skills needed for success at the next level and beyond.

At times, English language arts teachers will employ Close Reading to build students’ ability to critique

and analyze various genres and forms of literature. Close Reading should also be employed in science and social studies classrooms to practice reading and learning from primary and secondary sources, as scientists and historians do. Applying Close Reading provides opportunities to build on knowledge and skills taught in one domain, while helping students transfer understanding and skills to other topics and disciplines.

For some practitioners, the attributes of Close Reading will seem familiar and comfortable and thereby easy to assimilate into their current repertoire of strategies. But many others will have limited experience employing Close Reading in their own classrooms or will have had limited exposure to it in their teacher preparation programs. Many teachers will need opportunities to learn about Close Reading, and all teachers should engage in it as participants before employing it in their classrooms. Professional learning communities may be formed around this set of strategies; as teachers gain confidence and proficiency in the specifics, they will be well-positioned to help one another refine new skills associated with Close Reading.

- ***Teaching Close Reading demands teachers have substantive knowledge and understanding of text complexity and text-dependent questions—what they are and how they are employed in teaching Close Reading.***

The Common Core standards draw attention to the critical gap between reading demands and expectations in K-12 settings and those in college and careers. This gap has led to a heightened awareness of the qualities and complexity of texts being chosen for curricular inclusion and used for instruction.

Text complexity plays an integral role in the planning and execution of the Close Reading strategy. Teachers implementing Close Reading need varied opportunities to learn about text complexity and practice applying the process for identifying ap-

In order to bring the Close Reading strategy to life, teachers will need to deepen their understanding of text-dependent questions—how they are constructed, and how they are intentionally crafted to support the careful examination of text called for in Close Reading.

appropriate text at their respective grade levels. To be suited for Close Reading instruction, a text must be of the highest quality, with a richness and depth that supports and deserves deep analysis. Teachers' ability to identify rich, complex text—based on quantitative and qualitative measures, as well as variables related to the specific students and tasks at hand—is as important as understanding the principles that undergird the concept of text complexity.

In order to bring the Close Reading strategy to life, teachers will need to deepen their understanding of text-dependent questions—how they are constructed, and how they are intentionally crafted to support the careful examination of text called for in Close Reading. Text-dependent questions, as the name suggests, ask students to provide evidence from the text and draw inferences based on what the text says. Well-constructed text-dependent questions cause students to reflect on the text as opposed to reading quickly to get the gist of the selection.

The inclusion of these instructional strategies in daily practice will require professional development that meets teachers at their current level of understanding. While the specifics are best determined by districts and schools, it is important to acknowledge that merely exhorting teachers to employ Close Reading and text-dependent questions is inadequate. Teachers need to understand what the Common Core expects and the research undergirding these expectations, they need resources to guide them in adapting new strategies for their classrooms, and they need opportunities to practice and get feedback that improves their effectiveness.^{ix}

- ***Close Reading is used judiciously and employed for specific learning outcomes.***

A Close Reading lesson is typically situated within a longer unit of study and might be employed once or twice during the unit, for two to four days each time. For example, an excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech might be the subject of a Close Reading exercise in a history class after several days of study focused on the civil rights era. Alternately, or perhaps in concert, the text selection could also be used in an English language arts class focused on rhetoric.

The broader curricular context in which Close Reading takes place usually mitigates the need for extensive pre-reading activities, as prior instruction not directly related to the text prepares students to engage in the Close Reading lesson independently.

This understanding also helps frame the role of Close Reading as one strategy within a teacher's literacy and content development toolkit.

The specific instructional moves that define the Close Reading strategy are modified and adapted by the purpose of a particular lesson in order to meet the developmental level of learners. Teachers make critical decisions about the text chosen and the questions asked to facilitate deep understanding of content and/or the author's intent.

While a Close Reading lesson usually will sit within a broader unit of related content, there are occasions when a teacher might choose to have students complete a "cold read." Such an exercise can prepare students for Common Core-aligned assessments, and for the real-world experience of encountering text in unfamiliar contexts.

- ***Close Reading builds skill and motivation in the reader.***

Grappling with rich, complex texts is an exciting, thought-expanding experience that can change minds and mold beliefs. Repeated opportunities to process and manage such texts enhance the reader's knowledge of vocabulary, syntax, and the world—an experience all students should have. Historically, though, this approach has been reserved for our more advanced students; those deemed less able have been denied access to rich, rigorous text. Teachers who have implemented Close Reading in their classrooms are finding that being challenged by complex texts is not, as they feared, tripping students up; on the contrary, it is actually motivating students to work harder and think more deeply.

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Many teachers who are starting to use Close Reading since the advent of the Common Core observe greater engagement and effort from students. Here are two comments from teachers in Washoe County, Nevada:

“After a Close Reading of Tomás and the Library Lady, students in my first grade class were able to orally answer the questions “How had Tomás changed by the end of the book? What changed him?” Prior to using Close Reading, I would not have thought that five and six year olds would be capable of this kind of work. We are now teaching these young students how to write their answers. This is exciting work for me and engaging work for the students.”

K-2 Teacher,
Washoe County School District

This strategy not only empowered the students, but provided me an opportunity to witness that students really are capable of much deeper thought if we give them the time and the tools to show us.

4th Grade Teacher,
Washoe County School district*

Educators need to harness the knowledge of research, the wisdom of experience, and the imperative for improvement to implement Close Reading effectively within the context of a comprehensive literacy framework.

Conclusion

Educators need to harness the knowledge of research, the wisdom of experience, and the imperative for improvement to implement Close Reading effectively within the context of a comprehensive literacy framework. Teachers have to be innovative and creative, while connecting decisions about instructional practice to the research on reading development and the explicit demands of the Common Core. Hence we recommend that practitioners:

1. Are deliberate and intentional determining when, and for what instructional purposes, Close Reading is employed. The goal is to move students to read closely, independent of the teacher.
2. Understand that while engaged in Close Reading lessons, students naturally use prior knowledge to deepen their comprehension of the text. Teachers should activate prior knowledge and build background knowledge when appropriate, while ensuring that students’ examination of text is the central means of conveying information.

- i Common Core State Standards, retrieved on September 28, 2012 at <http://www.corestandards.org>.
- ii Jeanne S. Chall, Sue S. Conard, and Susan H. Harris, *An Analysis of Textbooks in Relation to Declining SAT Scores* (Princeton, N.J.: College Board, 1977).
- iii Gary L. Williamson, *Aligning the Journey With a Destination: A Model for K–16 Reading Standards* (Durham, N.C.: MetaMetrix Inc., 2006).
- iv Suzanne M. Adolf et al., "Developmental Changes in Reading Comprehension: Implications for Assessment and Instruction," in S. Jay Samuels and Alan Farstrup, eds., *What Research Has to Say About Reading Instruction*, 4th edition (New York: International Reading Association, 2011).
- v P. David Pearson and Margaret C. Gallagher, "The Instruction of Reading Comprehension," *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 8, no. 3 (July 1983) 317-344.
- vi Walter Kintsch, "The Role of Knowledge in Discourse Comprehension: A Construction-Integration Model." *Psychological Review* 95, no. 2 (1988) 163-182.
- vii Nell K. Duke et al., "Essential Elements of Fostering and Teaching Reading Comprehension," in S. Jay Samuels and Alan Farstrup, eds., *What Research Has to Say About Reading Instruction*, 4th edition (New York: International Reading Association, 2011).
- viii *Common Core State Standards* (Washington, D.C.: National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).
- ix For more information on text complexity and the design and use of text-dependent questions, see www.aspendrl.org. Joaquin Tamayo, Jr., "Tools for Teachers Facilitator's Guide: Close Reading & Text-Dependent Questions."
- x We sincerely thank Corinn Cathcart and Loree Gerboth, two teachers from Washoe County School District, for their input into the development of this primer.



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