Up Close with Close Reading

Strengthen Your Core • by | Beth Anne Burke

So, now that you are familiar with Common Core State Standards, let's look at one of the key methods the standards recommends: *close reading*. Exactly what is it? Close reading is thoughtful, critical analysis of a text that focuses on significant details or patterns to develop a deep, precise understanding of the text. It is a key technique listed in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and directs the reader's attention to the text itself. Close reading is different from traditional reading instruction, such as guided or shared reading, but both have important roles in developing students' reading skills.

Characteristics of Close Reading

While there is not a formula for close reading, there are essential characteristics. Close reading should focus on short, complex texts. Answers to questions should be rooted solely in the text. This means no personal, or text to self, connections. The architects of the CCSS believe that this levels the playing field for students; if all students have to answer questions using only information from what they read, all should be able to do so equally well. Those who have a wealth of background experiences will not have an unfair advantage over those who don't if everyone has to build responses based solely on the text. Here are some features that distinguish close reading:

- **Focus on complex short passages and excerpts.** While you may read entire articles or books with students, you don't want to read the entire text closely with students. Select a paragraph, page, or small section to examine, ponder, and discuss.

- **Dive right into the text with limited pre-reading activities**. As you activate prior knowledge, be careful that you aren't spoon-feeding details in the text that students should discover themselves. Only offer limited information that is crucial to students' ability to build their comprehension.

- **Reread deliberately.** Each time you revisit a text, do so with a different lens, working to deepen understanding. Reading closely means peeling the layers of a text one at a time to get at the meaning, making notes in the margins or on sticky notes.

- **Discuss the text with others.** Discussion is a critical part of the Common Core State Standards. Through discussion, students will refine their understanding. Have students discuss the text in small groups, then share their ideas with the class.

- **Respond to text-dependent questions.** The focus for a close read should be on pondering and developing a response to high-quality, text-dependent questions.

Close-Read Worthy?

Not every text is appropriate for students to read closely. For example, while students enjoy reading the books in the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series, these novels offer simple story lines and vocabulary that are easily understandable. When you are done reading them, they don't leave you pondering deep ideas. Close readings should leave you considering thought-provoking messages that go beyond the text.

Close-read-worthy texts include enough complex ideas to sustain exploring and discussing for one or more days of instruction. According to Tim Shanahan (2012), close reading is a multiday commitment to a text; you want students to read a text that offers rich enough vocabulary, ideas, and information to read, examine, and discuss over those days without feeling like you're beating a dead horse.

Text Selection: Which Text Is Best?

When selecting a text, the CCSS consider three factors of text complexity: qualitative, quantitative, and reader and task measures. Each of these is equally important when considering the complexity of a text.

Qualitative

Qualitative measures must be assessed by a human reader. They include things like text or sentence structures, vocabulary, and the knowledge demands on the reader. They also address how clearly the author conveys the message or whether the reader has to make a lot of inferences.

Quantitative

Quantitative measures are usually numbers—the readability level of the text. Originally, CCSS focused on the Lexile leveling system. It was later revised to include other systems, such as the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level test and Dale-Chall Readability Formula. Your school system may use one of these or a different one. Generally, readability measures use a computer program to analyze sentence and word length, word frequency, and other factors to assign a number or level to a text. While a qualitative measure is a good place to begin to find an appropriate text, it is important to include the other factors as well. For example, if you were relying solely on Lexile levels, you might select *Twilight* by Stephanie Meyer, which has a Lexile of 720, over *The Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan, which has a Lexile of 740 for fourth graders.

Reader and Task Measures

The final important factor in selecting an appropriate text is the reader and task measures. Teachers know their particular group of students; they know how much prior knowledge students likely have on the topic and how interested they may be in reading about it. They also will know about the students' reading skills, and whether the text will be easy or difficult for them. The reader and task measures will help determine how much modeling and guidance a teacher/librarian will provide when teaching a text to students.

Grade Level Exemplar Texts

Appendix B of the Common Core State Standards includes sample lists of exemplar texts that give you an idea of what complex texts look like in each of the grade level bands. You may notice that many of the texts are classics and may have been traditionally associated with higher grades. Common Core State Standards have increased readability ranges, raising expectations for students in all grade levels. Appendix B of the CCSS also describes the research and rationale behind this change.

Text-Dependent Questions

Text-dependent questions are a critical element in the Common Core State Standards and the focus of close reading. They require students to dig deeply into the text to answer them. In fact, a text-dependent question cannot be answered without using the text; background knowledge and prior experiences should not be included in written or oral responses.

To craft effective text-dependent questions, you must read and understand the text thoroughly. As you plan a lesson, begin with

CCSS Text Exemplars

K–1 Read Aloud Stories	*Little House in the Big Woods*, by Laura Ingalls Wilder. HarperCollins, 2004. *Lon Po Po: A Red-Riding Hood Story from China*, by Ed Young. Putnam, 1989. *Mr. Popper's Penguins* by Richard and Florence, Atwell. Little, Brown, 1988.
2–3 Read Aloud Stories	*Charlotte's Web*, by E. B. White. HarperCollins, 2001. *The Sign Painter*, by Allen Say. Houghton Mifflin, 2000. *The Thirteen Clocks*, by James Thurber. New York Review Children's Collection, 2008.
4–5 Stories (*Read Alouds not specified for this grade band*)	*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, by Lewis Caroll. William Morrow, 1992. *M. C. Higgins, the Great*, by Virginia Hamilton. Simon & Schuster, 1999. *The Secret Garden*, by Frances Hodgson Burnett. HarperCollins, 1985.

Text Complexity Factors

Close reading should occur with appropriately complex text. There are a number of factors that contribute to text complexity. Teachers should differentiate, or vary, how they approach a text with students, depending on the text complexity and students' needs. Complex text includes:

Vocabulary

- Academic and domain-specific terms

- Tier 2 vocabulary—high-utility, complex words that can be used in multiple contexts (Beck et. al. 2008)

Syntax

- Coherence—how well the events and concepts are logically connected and clearly explained

- Unity—how the ideas focus on the topic and not irrelevant or distracting information

- Audience appropriateness—the match of text to background knowledge of the target reader

Text Structures
Description
Compare and contrast
Temporal sequence
Cause and effect
Problem and solution

Text Features
Headings/subheadings
Signal words
Graphics
Pictures

the end in mind: What do you want students to be able to know and do as a result of the lesson? This may be a written or oral response. Carefully select a few text-dependent questions as you plan your lesson. After asking a text-dependent question, use a cue to redirect students back to the text (e.g., *Remember to use specific evidence from the text to support your answer*).

The ability to gather information from sources, paraphrase it, restate it, and cite sources for it is a life skill recognized by both Common Core State and AASL Standards. **Common Core Reading Anchor Standard 1** requires students to be able to quote accurately and appropriately. That is, they have to select the right information to support their answer. In addition, students should be able to use proper punctuation to quote an original text. This blends easily with AASL Standards 1.3.3: "Follow ethical and legal guidelines to gather and use information."

"Touch the Text"

Effective text-dependent questions require students to go back to the text in order to answer them. Students are not used to this; often they have been able to answer questions with vague inferences and prior knowledge. To guide students in locating specific text evidence in order to answer text-dependent questions, try this:

- Display a portion of a book or poem on a document camera. Read it aloud and ask a text-dependent question.

- Model and guide students to physically touch the portion of the text that proves their answer. This can be done individually or in partners or teams.

- For another option, provide students with a copy of a page and have them compete to find the text evidence the fastest.

Using Close Reading: Library Lens

There is no specific sequence in a close reading lesson; these steps are meant to generally guide you in crafting a library lesson that scaffolds students and focuses on increasingly complex text-dependent questions. Begin with questions about the big ideas in the text and gradually ask higher-level questions that require the students to look back at the text (Shanahan 2012).

First Read: Key Ideas and Details
Select a text that is close-read worthy. Read aloud and ask students a question about the big ideas in the text:

- What is this story/article/text mostly about?

- Summarize the story/text.

- Compare and contrast [characters/events/settings].

- What message is the author sharing?

Second Read: Craft and Structure

For a second close read, select a portion or chunk of the text (one paragraph to one page or so) that includes ideas that require digging deeper. Select a text-dependent question that looks at how the author presents information:

- Explain what [specific vocabulary word from the text] means.

- How does the author feel about [the topic]?

- What is the problem/solution in the story?

- What is the text structure of this [story/article/text]?

Third Read: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

The third close reading of a text should go even deeper, requiring students to synthesize and analyze information from several sections of a text, or multiple texts or media. They may record their ideas on sticky notes, graphic organizer(s), or a thinking sheet. Select a text-dependent question that requires higher-level thinking:

- What text features did the author include? How did they help the reader?

- How did the pictures help the reader understand the story?

- How did the visual elements (pictures, graphs, etc.) that the author included contribute to the tone of this text?

- Compare the book with the movie version.

For a sample close reading lesson, go to *www.librarysparks.com*.

Resources

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Creating Robust Vocabulary: Frequently Asked Questions and Extended Examples, by Isabel L. Beck, Margaret McKeown, and Linda Kucan. Guilford, 2008.

"The Instruction of Reading Comprehension," by P. D. Pearson and M. Gallagher. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 8, 317–344, 1983.

What is Close Reading? by Tim Shanahan. *www.shanahanonliteracy.com/2012/06/what-is-close-reading.html*, June 18, 2012.

AASL Learning Standards & Common Core State Standards Crosswalk. *www.ala.org/aasl/standards-guidelines/crosswalk*

Common Core State Standards. *www.corestandards.org*

The Lexile Framework for Reading. *www.lexile.com*

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