

# Close Reading as Part of a Comprehensive Literacy Framework

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*We focus on purpose-driven instruction, modeling, collaborative learning, and wide, independent reading, which all can compliment close reading.*

Close reading has received a great deal of attention over the past few years (e.g., Boyles, 2013). To our thinking, close reading is an important, and perhaps neglected, instructional routine (e.g., Fisher & Frey, 2012). Having said that, we also believe that close reading is not a comprehensive literacy instructional model. As teachers, schools, and districts implement the Common Core State Standards, we are concerned that close reading alone might be viewed as equivalent to the standards themselves. After all, anchor standard 1 for reading suggests that students must “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” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA Center & CCSSO], 2010, p. 10). Armed with this standard, literacy frameworks may be revised to focus exclusively or primarily on close reading. In this article, we focus on the ways in which close reading can be integrated into a comprehensive literacy framework.

## Close Reading Defined

Brown and Kappes (2012), in their report for the Aspen Institute, define *close reading* in this way:

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. (p. 2)

Shanahan (2013) notes that there are different purposes for each of the subsequent readings of a text. For example, he suggests that the first reading should focus on “What does the text say?” whereas the second reading should focus on “How does the text work?” and the third reading should focus on “What does the text mean?”

In addition, students typically annotate the text, consider and respond to a variety of text-dependent questions, and engage in discussions about the text with their peers and teacher (Frey & Fisher, 2013). Importantly, close reading is characterized by limited frontloading and pre-teaching of vocabulary. Pearson (2013) notes “as a profession we have overindulged at the trough of prior knowledge, the remedy is to balance its role, not eliminate it” (p. 257). Close reading provides instructional space for students to try on what they have learned, under the guidance of a teacher, without removing the need to actually read the text.

The texts explored during close reading are typically used in subsequent writing tasks, debates, or Socratic seminars. That simple statement, that the texts used in close reading are the basis for further work, should make it clear that close reading is not enough in a comprehensive literacy framework. Instead, students need intentional instruction in which close reading is featured.

## Teaching Students to Read Like Detectives

This popular phrase associated with the Common Core State Standards and attributed to David Coleman, one of the authors of the standards, has a long history. For example, in 1989, Blachowicz and Leipzig argued that students should become “reading detectives and writing architects” (p. 3). But it’s more than simply assigning students hard texts and demanding that they read those texts again until the meaning reveals itself. Students need intentional instruction as well as the opportunity to try on that which they have been taught. For us, that starts with being clear about the purpose of the lesson.

### Purpose-Driven Instruction

Students and teachers should know what is expected, in terms of learning and doing, for each lesson that they experience. This is challenging, given that there are new expectations (the Common Core) and that these expectations are higher than previous standards. To ensure that students learn to read like detectives, and apply that knowledge to complex texts during close reading, they need to be taught how to think about the texts, which demands a clear purpose, objective, or learning target. Simply saying, “Class, we’re going to read this to figure out what the author thinks” is insufficient. Instead, teachers need to identify clear learning targets and then align instruction and assessment with those targets. For example, letting a group of first graders know that “today we are going to ask clarifying questions to figure out the meaning of unknown words” highlights the task and learning expected of them. As students learn to do this, they will begin to generalize this habit and apply word solving to the wide range of texts they read.

### Modeling More Than Strategies

Teacher modeling is a powerful way to build students’ understanding of text and apprentice them into sophisticated ways of thinking about texts. Students of all ages deserve to hear the thinking of their teachers as they read complex texts. Thinking is invisible. As Duffy (2003) noted, “The only way to model thinking is to talk about how to do it. That is, we provide a verbal description of the thinking one does or, more accurately, an *approximation* of the thinking involved” (p. 11). Over the past decade or so, modeling has focused extensively on

comprehension strategies. But students require instruction on more than just the common comprehension strategies such as predicting, inferring, visualizing, questioning, summarizing, and monitoring. Understanding qualitative text complexity means that teachers must also model based on the factors that contribute to text complexity in the first place. It’s hard to predict your way through a text like *The Life of Pi* (Martel, 2001) if you haven’t been taught about unreliable narrators. Similarly, it’s hard to visualize the phrase “she looks like somethin’ the cat drug in and the dog wouldn’t eat” (Stanley, 1996, p. 2) if you haven’t been taught about figurative language and nonstandard English usage. **Table 1** includes a list of four components of text complexity, the aspects of each of those components that contribute to complexity, as well as factors to consider for modeling. Teacher modeling should occur each and every day, and sometimes more than once per day, if students are going to acquire the habits of mind necessary to read, evaluate, critique, and discuss complex texts. Although important, we cannot allow close reading to squeeze teacher modeling from our instruction.

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### Collaborative Learning

In addition to teacher modeling, students need daily opportunities to interact with their peers using academic language. Simply said, students are unlikely to develop academic language proficiency from simply listening to others; they need to produce the vocabulary, structures, and discourse themselves. There are any numbers of effective instructional routines for accomplishing this, from literature circles (e.g., Daniels, 2001) to reciprocal teaching (e.g., Palincsar & Brown, 1984). The point is that students must have time during literacy instruction to interact with others using academic language. This requires that teachers structure the time, set expectations for students, and hold them accountable for producing evidence of their learning. Importantly, this is specifically addressed in the Common Core State Standards. Speaking and listening anchor standard 1 reads:

Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010, p. 22)

**Table 1. Qualitative Factors of Text Complexity**

Component	Aspects	When a text is complex . . .
Levels of Meaning and Purpose	Density and complexity	Many ideas come at the reader, or 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, and rich descriptions.
	Narration	The narrator is unreliable, changes during the course of the text, or has a limited perspective for the reader.
	Text features	Fewer signposts such as headings, bold words, margin notes, font changes, or footnotes are used.
	Graphics	Visual information is not repeated in the text itself but the graphics or illustrations are essential to understanding the main ideas.
Language Conventuality and Clarity	Standard English and variations	Variations of standard English, such as regional dialects or vernaculars that the reader is not familiar with, 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: *Rigorous Reading: 5 Access Points for Comprehending Complex Texts*, by N. Frey & D. Fisher, 2013, Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin. Copyright 2013 by Corwin. Reprinted with permission.

Every parent and educator knows that students do not arrive at school knowing how to engage in a range of conversations, building on each other's ideas and expressing their own. We all have colleagues who have a hard time doing this. Developing this type of thinking and speaking ability requires instructional attention, and we cannot allow close reading to crowd out the oral language development that so many students need.

### Wide, Independent Reading

We cannot imagine an instructional framework for literacy that fails to provide students an opportunity to read widely. Although practice does not make perfect, and students need instruction to become better readers, practice can make permanent. And that's what we hope for: students who develop a permanent habit of reading. As advocates for close reading, we are aware that there is a potential for students to read less text over the course of the year. Part of the challenge with the Common Core State Standards is to ensure that students read widely and deeply, not just one or the other.

### Where Does Close Reading Fit?

The structures we have discussed thus far could consume all of the instructional minutes allocated for literacy and in fact have in too many classrooms. As we have noted several times in this article, we hope that close reading does not crowd out some of the strong, evidence-based aspects of literacy instruction that have served our profession well. On the flip side, we realize that these other instructional routines have squeezed out close reading. Students seem to rarely have time to deeply, slowly, and purposefully read and discuss complex texts. We all have the responsibility to make that time. Given the lack of evidence to date about the ways in which close reading can and should be integrated into literacy instruction, our local district has taken a bold step and recommends that students experience close reading instruction two to three times per week. Thus far, this seems to be sound advice, as it leaves instructional space for students to acquire the skills necessary to think deeply about a text without relegating close reading to an assessment strategy used every few weeks.

We have come to think about close reading as one form of guided instruction, with teachers and students

sharing responsibility for the learning. It's not that close reading should be teacher directed any more than it should be the sole responsibility of individual students (Fisher & Frey, 2013). Yes, we'd like students to apply what they have learned throughout the literacy framework to the texts that they read independently, but they also need time devoted to practicing to do so. As such, teachers should rely on questions, prompts, and cues to guide students during close reading. They should listen carefully to students' interactions with one another about the text under investigation and only intervene when necessary. The text-dependent questions should be kept in a teachers' metaphorical back pocket, to be used when the conversation falters. And when students cannot respond to these questions, or fail to supply evidence for their answers, teachers can prompt and cue.

Who could argue that this type of guided application of the instructional priorities and content would not be useful? If overdone, students may not receive sufficient instruction to be able to make meaning of the text. And when under-done, students rarely develop the processes for deeply thinking about the text and instead rely on others, namely their teachers, for explanations. Close reading, as part of a comprehensive literacy framework, allows for a much more supportive, yet still gradual, release of responsibility.

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