

Close Reading

The Common Core State Standards have brought new attention to a long-respected and valuable reading strategy called close reading.

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There are a host of different ways to engage students in reading, including instructional routines that require extensive teacher support, such as shared readings, and instructional routines that require extensive peer support, such as reciprocal teaching or literature circles. The Common Core State Standards have drawn increased attention to an instructional routine called *close reading*, known in some circles as *analytic reading*.

Close reading is not a new instructional routine; it has existed for many decades as the practice of reading a text for a level of detail not used in everyday reading (Richards, 1929). Close readings should be done with texts that are worthy and complex enough to warrant repeated reading and detailed investigation. (See January 2012 column for a discussion about text complexity.) As Newkirk (2010) noted, not all texts demand this level of attention, but some texts do.

In close reading, the reader has to develop a fairly sophisticated understanding of what the author actually said. The problem, as described by advocates of close reading, is that students are encouraged to answer questions that too soon take them away from the reading to their own experiences. Instead, as Rosenblatt (1995) recommended, there must be a transaction

between the reader and the text. Readers should develop an understanding of the author's words and bring their own experiences, beliefs, and ideas to bear on the text. In her words, "The reader must remain faithful to the author's text and must be alert to the potential clues concerning character and motive" (p. 11). Rosenblatt cautioned that readers might ignore elements in a text and fail to realize that they are "imputing to the author views unjustified by the text" (p. 11).

Teaching Close Reading

If students already knew how to do this, then we would not be spending time focused on close reading. The problem is that students do not arrive at school already knowing how to interrogate a text and dig down to its deeper meaning. Teachers have to teach students how to do this in both informational and literary texts. In other words, close readings are not the pervue of English teachers; close readings should be conducted in any class in which texts play a role, whether it is science, social studies, auto mechanics, art, or physical education. The video that accompanies this column features a social studies teacher using a close reading approach to investigate a primary source document. Close readings have a few



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Watch the Video

Watch the video for close reading strategies.
www.nassp.org/PL0113frey



factors in common, including the following items.

Short, worthy passages. Because close readings can be time-consuming, it is often best to select shorter pieces of text for instruction. Those selections, typically between three and nine paragraphs, allow students to practice the analytic skills required of sophisticated readers. Longer, extended texts are often used to encourage students to practice the skills that they have been taught during close readings.

The practice of rereading. As part of a close reading, students must read and reread the selected text several times. This requires students to expand their purposes for each repeated reading. Subsequent readings can be completed independently, with peers, with teacher read-alouds, or any combination of those approaches.

Annotation. Readers who take the time to really read and investigate a text take notes right on the text. They “read with a pencil” so that they can make notes about their understandings or quickly find evidence when they need it. Adler and Van Doren (1940/1972) identified why annotation is so important:

Why is marking a book indispensable to reading it? First, it keeps you awake—not merely conscious, but wide awake. Second, reading, if active, is thinking, and thinking tends to express itself in words, spoken or written. The person who says he knows what he thinks but cannot express it usually does not know what he thinks. Third, writing your reactions down helps you remember the thoughts of the author (p. 49).

Annotations include the follow-

ing types of marks in a text (we will focus on teaching annotation in next month’s column):

- Underline the major points.
- Circle keywords or phrases that are confusing or unknown to you.
- Use a question mark for questions that you have during the reading. Be sure to write your question.
- Use an exclamation mark for things that surprise you, and briefly note what it was that caught your attention.
- Draw an arrow when you make a connection to something inside the text or to an idea or experience outside the text. Briefly note your connections.
- Write *EX* when the author provides an example.
- Numerate arguments, important ideas, or key details, and write words or phrases that restate them.

Text-dependent questions. As part of every close reading, students respond to text-dependent questions that require them to provide evidence from the text, rather than their own experiences. As we described in the September 2012 column, there are ways to create text-dependent questions, and they do not have to be recall and regurgitation questions.

After-reading tasks that require students to use information from the text. Rather than take students away from the text, postreading activities as part of close reading should require that the student return to the text. For example, students may write an argumentative piece in which they use evidence from the text and other texts; engage in a Socratic seminar; or debate a topic. After-reading tasks should help students consolidate the meaning of texts and deepen their comprehension far beyond what they would be able to accomplish on their own.

A Close Reading Example

Middle school English teacher Armando Perez asks his students to read “Eleven,” a short story by Sandra Cisneros. He points out that they are still exploring the inner lives of characters and how those inner lives compare with the lives that others can see. The students read the text independently, making notes as they do so. One student, Fernando, underlines several places in the text and circles two places. Following their independent reading, Perez reads the text aloud to students, pausing to think aloud in three places that seemed to have caused confusion for his students. He knew that because he had observed them as they annotated the text and could thus target his modeling on areas of confusion.

At one point, he pauses and says, “They have a lot of years and numbers in this text, but this says that the sweater is maybe 1,000 years old. I’m having a hard time believing that. I’m thinking that if it really were 1,000 years old, it would be in a museum. I’m thinking that this is an example of hyperbole that is being used to make a point.” Following his modeling, Perez asks his students to explore a couple of questions, including, “How is age like an onion, at least according to the author?” and “Why does she start crying when she has to wear the sweater?” As the students talk with one another about those questions, they refer back to the text to locate specific information for their responses.

Next, Perez asks students to talk with their team members about the character Rachel’s inner life saying, “From what the author tells us, what is going on inside Rachel when her teacher says that the sweater has to belong to someone?” The students are

to focus on the words that Rachel uses to describe herself, such as skinny, and how the author refers to her “little voice.” A student in the class says, “I don’t think Rachel has confidence because she stumbles on her answer to the teacher, and then it says that she’s feeling like she is three again.”

Perez continues inviting arguments, with evidence, as students reread the text looking for examples. They discuss the text within their groups and periodically are invited to share with the whole class. After they have read the text at least four times, Perez asks his students to use their annotations to describe the inner life of one of the characters in the short story. He says, “You might select Rachel, but alternatively you could select Mrs. Price or Sylvia or even

Phyllis. Just remember to describe the character’s inner life using evidence provided from the text.” As the students get to work, Perez meets with several who have struggled with tasks like this in the past to make sure that they are starting on the right track.

Conclusion

Close readings are an important component of reading instruction, but they are not the only instructional routine that students need to use to become successful readers. As an instructional leader, you must ensure that students are engaged in reading texts that are worthy of their time. You also must ensure that students investigate the text sufficiently to really develop an appropriate level of understanding. Combined with shared, collaborative,

and independent readings, close readings will give students the experiences they need to become skilled in analytic reading, a prerequisite for college and career success. PL

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