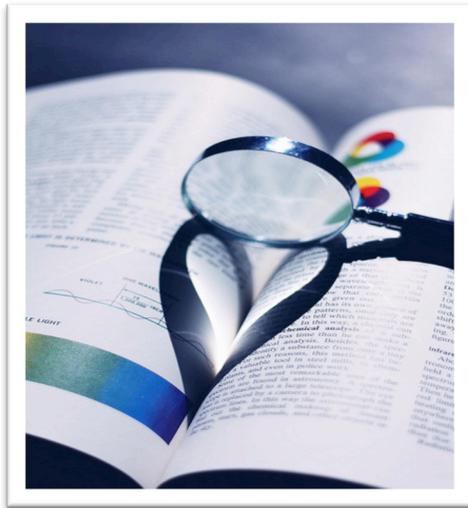


# How Close is Close Reading?

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## Abstract

*Close Reading is a strategy that can be used when reading challenging text. This strategy requires teachers to provide scaffolding, and create opportunities for think-alouds and rereading of text in order to help students become active readers who focus on finding text-based support for their answers. In addition, teachers must also be aware of the risks as well as the benefits of using Close Reading to make wise instructional decisions.*

*Keywords: close reading, scaffolding, comprehension*

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## Introduction

Close Reading is a strategy that can be used to understand challenging text (Boyles, 2012/2013; Fisher & Frey, 2013; Frey & Fisher, 2013; Hinchman & Moore, 2013). Close Reading comprehension involves the reader developing a deeper understanding of text, not a quick read for the gist of the passage (Shanahan, 2012).

Close Reading requires both the teacher and the student to analyze a reading passage and examine it for details, some of which include understanding how the text works, the author's message, providing text evidence to support thoughts and predictions the reader is developing, and making connections between the reader and the text itself (Frey & Fisher 2013; Shanahan, 2012). By working with Close Reading techniques, picking critical parts of the text to take a close look at and being able to think analytically teachers provide students with a foundation for developing critical thinking skills.

## Supporting Educators

There are many organizations, such as the International Reading Association (IRA), National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and Foundation for Critical Thinking (FCT) that provide guidance for the teacher in addressing reading, writing, speaking/listening, language, foundational skills as well as literacy in history/social studies, science and technical subjects. These organizations provide comprehensive resources for teachers to understand how

to incorporate Close Reading strategies and activities into the daily lessons. They also help teachers to gain a strong repertoire of teaching strategies to meet the needs of their students.

### **Teacher's Knowledge**

First, teachers need to understand the purpose of the readings they have chosen for their students (Lapp, Moss, Johnson, & Grant, 2012). Teachers ask themselves: What is their goal for using this particular piece of text within their content area? What is the author's purpose for writing this piece of text? Do the two complement one another or are they contrary to one another?

Secondly, teachers guide their students beyond that first impression of the text. Skimming and scanning are good techniques but not when doing a close read. Questions are formulated and answers sought to those questions during the close read. Time for discussion and interaction with the text provides students with the opportunity to see how their peers create meaning. These systematic and explicit teaching of concepts is planned so that a logical progressive sequence is in place to outline for students how to attack a close read (Frey & Fisher, 2013).

### **Instructional Approach**

Over the last decade, teachers have been using the transactional reader response approach (Rosenblatt, 1968) to activate schema (Anderson, 1977) in order to promote understanding by developing meaningful connections and creating metacognitive readers (Flavell, 1979). However, this approach "left readers with the notion that the text was simply a launching point for their musings, images that popped into their heads, and random questions that, in the end, did little to enhance their understanding of the text" (Boyles, 2012/2013, para. 6).

Using Close Reading procedures, teachers need to change their instructional practices (Boyles, 2012/2013; Frey & Fisher, 2012). Teachers work with finding text-based answers and using evidence based conversations to find thoughtful, precise answers to questions. Here teachers focus on helping students read carefully to draw evidence and knowledge from the text. This close read requires students to examine texts of adequate range and complexity while being taught strategies to develop understanding and comprehension (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, p.1).

In Close Reading, the teacher's focus is not on the amount of reading the student is doing but on the difficulty of that reading. Support is provided through scaffolded instruction (Vygotsky, 1987) and think alouds (Saye & Brush, 2002; Holton & Clarke, 2006) to help students attain meaning from the text. The goal is to give students the responsibility to be active participants in constructing their understanding of the read text, for the rereading of text, each time discussing a different idea and/or question, and getting students excited and thinking about points of view and text support. In addition, vocabulary is stressed, not as memorized words, but as a way to access words that are often encountered but again, may not be understood (Lapp, Moss, Johnson, & Grant, 2012).

### **Close Reading in the Classroom**

Close Reading encourages students to develop a deeper understanding of challenging text they are required to read. Teachers guide students through the meaning of text layer by layer. Importantly, and almost contrary to popular teaching practices, introductions are not frontloaded. All too often we strive to build students background knowledge about a topic to the point where reading the text is no longer necessary to gain the information for the lesson. According to

Fisher and Frey (2012) “teachers must be aware of the risks as well as the benefits of pre-teaching to make wise instructional decisions about when and why they can judiciously use it. Pre-teaching should be avoided when planning inquiry-based instruction and close reading of a complex text (p.84).”

With Close Reading, teachers provide enough information to begin the reading but not so much information that students do not need to read the text. Teachers plan in depth stopping points throughout the text to examine and discuss pivotal moments crucial to developing that understanding of the authors meaning (Allam, 2012). Key terms, phrases, vocabulary and authors purpose are noted and examined based on the evidence presented within the text (Marzano & Pickering, 2005). Finally, teachers ask students to write about their interaction developing even deeper understanding of the material.

### Close Reading and Gradual Release of Responsibility

The gradual release of responsibility, a theoretical model for instruction proven effective for improving literary achievement (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983; Fisher & Frey, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978), sets the stage to explain how to deliver a close reading lesson. Teachers begin by modeling for students what they eventually want students to be able to do by the end of the lesson. As seen in Figure 1, teachers teach “to” the students by offering direct explanation for how to attack the reading, explaining how “I do” the reading. Teachers use model text to work through the written text verbalizing their thinking and marking notations in the manuscript for students to see a representation of what is happening with the teachers thought process. Students are watching how this process unfolds.

Next, teachers move toward working “with” students and this Close Reading process. Here students collaborate with the teacher as “we do” the work together. Students try out their thinking and practice what they have seen the teacher do via think alouds. This guided practice is a time for reteaching as the student and teacher work together to construct the meaning of the text. Slowly the responsibility of developing meaning moves toward the responsibility of the student.

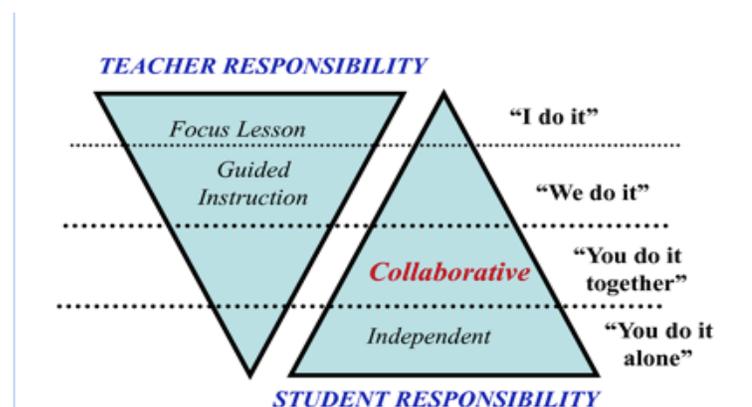


Figure 1. Gradual Release Model (Fisher & Frey, 2008).

Student collaboration with his peers marks the “you do it” portion of the instruction as students work together to think through their new learning. A large part of developing this new

knowledge is hammered out as the student works and has conversations with peers. This student conversation helps to clarify misunderstandings and allows student's time to process the text. As the conversation unfolds, teachers can circulate around the room listening in on the dialogue to help refine the thinking process of the students. This guided practice time is valuable for both student and teacher as students gain a better understanding of what is happening within the context of the passages being read and teachers gain a better understanding of what is happening with the students thinking (Fisher & Frey, 2012; Marzano, 2007; Zeleman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005).

Finally it is time for the application of this new learning. Now students will work independently. Here teachers work "by" the side of the student as the student takes control of the understanding, "does it alone," and shows that he knows how to process text. Teachers stand by watching the thinking unfold as the students take complete ownership for understanding the text.

### **Direct Strategy Instruction**

"Close Reading and gathering knowledge from specific texts should be at the heart of classroom activities and not be consigned to the margins when completing assignments. Reading strategies should work in the service of reading comprehension (rather than an end unto themselves) and assist students in building knowledge and insight from specific texts. To be effective, instruction should occur when they illuminate specific aspects of a text" (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, p. 9). To achieve this goal there are techniques teachers can offer students through direct instruction using the gradual release model that will make teaching how to do a close reading more manageable (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983; Zeleman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005). When students practice these strategies they begin to embed them in their everyday reading, as they become more proficient readers.

Exemplary reading practices include direct instruction of reading strategies. This direct instruction teaches students that when offering answers to questions, the reader needs to be able to cite and refer back to specific lines in a text as support for their thinking. To accomplish this goal, there are some very easy, commonly used techniques that can be stressed and practiced each time a student begins a close read.

First, teachers can help students by numbering each paragraph, section or stanza in the left hand margin so students can easily refer back to the text for evidence for answers and their classmates can locate the place in the text to which is being referred. This simple act of numbering points all readers to the same area of text when it is referenced during a discussion. Finding the specific evidence that is being referenced becomes much easier when all readers are working with numbered text allowing students to focus on the discussion, not get lost in trying to locate the information.

A second strategy that teachers can offer students is showing them how to chunk their text. Full text can be overwhelming, especially for students that struggle. According to Marzano (2007) students can only process so much new information at one time, but when you present smaller 'chunks' of information that information becomes easier to process. By drawing a horizontal line between chunks of paragraphs the text becomes more manageable. When this skill is first introduced to students the teacher can chunk the text before handing out the assignment. The more familiar the students are with the content the larger the chunk can be. Then as the year progresses the teacher can tell the students which paragraphs they should chunk and finally students can chunk the text on their own. It is important to remember that there is no

right or wrong way to chunk the text, but we do want our students to be able to justify why they chose the chunks they did.

“How Does a Hurricane Form?”

Hurricanes are the most awesome, violent storms on Earth. They form near the equator over warm ocean waters. <sup>3</sup> Actually, <sup>4</sup> I don't live near the equator and I have hurricanes.

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The generic, scientific term for these storms, wherever they occur, is tropical cyclone. <sup>1</sup> Other names they are given, depending on where in the world they are born, are typhoons, cyclones, severe tropical cyclones, or severe cyclonic storms. <sup>2</sup> Whatever they are called, the same forces and conditions are at work in forming these giant storms, which all can cause damage or devastation when they hit land where people live. <sup>3</sup> SANDY!!! <sup>4</sup> Damaging like the roller coaster?

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<sup>1</sup> What are the ingredients? <sup>2</sup> two ingredients <sup>3</sup> 80° <sup>4</sup> warm air Tropical cyclones are like engines that require warm, moist air as fuel. So the first ingredient needed for a tropical cyclone is warm ocean water. <sup>1</sup> That is why tropical cyclones form only in tropical regions where the ocean is at least 80 F for at least the top 50 meters (about 165 feet) below the surface.

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<sup>1</sup> What is the process? <sup>2</sup> The process <sup>3</sup> wind <sup>4</sup> moves west The second ingredient for a tropical cyclone is wind. In the case of hurricanes that form in the Atlantic Ocean, the wind blowing westward across the Atlantic from Africa provides the necessary ingredient. As the wind passes over the oceans surface, water evaporates (turns into water vapor) and rises. As it rises, the water vapor cools, and condenses back into large water droplets, forming large cumulonimbus clouds. These clouds are just the beginning.

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<sup>1</sup> 4 Meteorologists have divided the development of a tropical cyclone into four stages: <sup>1</sup> Tropical disturbance, <sup>2</sup> tropical depression, <sup>3</sup> tropical storm, and <sup>4</sup> full-fledged tropical cyclone. \*

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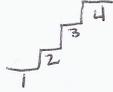
<sup>1</sup> 5 

Figure 2. Modeling Coding of Text (Expeditionary Learning, 2013).

Another valuable Close Reading strategy to teach students is how to code text. Student's code text when they underline and circle with a purpose, highlight or use sticky notes to flag ideas. Asking students to code text such as underline the important information, is a vague statement. When given a directive such as this, students are not looking for concrete ideas with which they can identify. It is important to direct students to learn how to code very specific items. The focus should be on information you want the students to take away from the text.

They should be looking for specific elements within the text and those elements will change depending on the task they are given.

One way to code text is to use pre-taught symbols (Zeleman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005). For example, when studying argument students can use a check mark for what they already know and a question mark by something that raises a question. They can also use double question marks when a statement confuses them as well as a star for something that seems important to their reading and/or an exclamation point for something new or interesting. In addition, students can underline statements by the author that support their thinking. When working with poetry students could underline the sentences that provide imagery. When working with key terms students could underline definitions found within the text, or circle strategic terms or repeated words throughout the text. When coding text with a purpose teachers are helping students focus their attention on an area that is more specific than just the important information (Fisher & Frey, 2013).

Text coding can continue with margin notes- marking notations in the passages' margins, as another close reading strategy. Instead of telling students to make notes in the margin tell students to use the left side margin to answer a particular question, compare/contrast characters, etc. for each chunk of text. Demonstrate for students how to do this with a short sentence or a small visual. In the right hand margin model for students how to summarize each chunk in one or two words using a descriptive word to illustrate what the author is writing about. Use sticky notes if the students cannot write on the text or provide a bookmark with chunks pre-outlined so students can follow along as they read and annotate. Figure 2 is an example of a piece of text that has undergone a close read.

### **Text Dependent Questions**

Using Close Reading strategies will allow students to answer questions with evidence directly from their text, no longer relying solely on information from outside resources (Boyles, 2012/2013). Using these strategies teachers can help students move away from reading for a general understanding of the material to delving deeper into the text to determine items such as author's purpose, inferences, opinions and arguments. Using Close Reading strategies requires students to use the content of the material to develop understanding.

When developing questions for close reading, teachers want to move beyond the general gist of the passage to focus on more in-depth understanding. Questions developed should require the reader to:

- Return to the passage to find supporting evidence for their thinking.
- Locate details required for understanding the text. These details should build toward the essential understanding of the passage as a whole.
- Examine the text structure of sentences throughout the passage. The structure of these sentences will give the reader a better understanding of the author's message if they understand how the sentence is constructed (Fisher & Frey, 2012).

The types of questions developed by the teacher will also lead students into the practice of reading. For example, if a teacher asks all literal questions, then students will do a very surface read of the material skimming and scanning for answers. However, if a teacher asks questions that require a student to synthesize information from different sources to arrive at a conclusion then students will be required to do a close read. This higher order thinking will be

accomplished when we ask students to examine selected passages within their text and help guide them to find that information through strategy instruction and questioning.

## Conclusion

The use of strategies and questioning outlined above help students understand how Close Reading of text helps them to gain a deeper understanding of the content being read. Close Reading allows challenging text to be chunked into manageable pieces for rereading and in-depth study. Using strategies, such as formulating questions, analyzing key events, analyzing text structures, determining word meanings, determining central idea, drawing inferences, determining why the author wrote the text, and evaluating the text with what we already know enables students to think more deeply about their reading and in turn enhance their discussions with peers while returning to the text to cite evidence to support their thinking (Fisher & Frey, 2013).

Thus, Close Reading strategies help students read to uncover layers of meaning that lead to deep comprehension. As students practice this close reading, they develop a model within their thinking that will enable them to apply this new skill to other texts (Boyles, 2012/2013; Frey & Fisher, 2013). Close Reading will provide our students with the knowledge and skills necessary to be career and/or college ready (Achieve, 2014), as Close Reading provide a foundation for developing critical thinking (Critical Thinking Community, 2013).

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