

Helping Students Read Closely

Close reading is a process of careful analytical reading. It involves repeated readings, text-based discussion, and (often) written analysis of complex text.¹ The purpose of reading closely is to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the text, to learn academic vocabulary, to build analytical reading skills, and foster perseverance and a passion for deep reading of worthy texts. Effective close reading lessons help students to build these skills by providing opportunities for joyfully and collaborative interaction with rich and compelling texts.

The purpose of this document is to give teachers additional guidance to understand the design of close reading lessons in EL Education’s Grades 3-8 ELA curriculum, and also to think about how to modify module lessons or design close reading lessons of their own. Close reading of rich complex text is fully integrated in each of the Grades 3-8 modules. In each module, typically close reading of a complex text occurs over a series of two to three lessons; however students may closely read short excerpts in a single lesson.

Determining the instructional sequence for close reading is based on three factors: the complexity and richness of the text, the relative background knowledge and skill of the readers, and the specific teaching purpose for which the text was selected –the understandings to be built or skills to be taught and practiced. Helping students grapple with complex text involves careful consideration of each of these factors and should be considered a series of instructional decisions rather than a rigid protocol.

The goal of helping students read closely is to develop students’ ability to independently read complex text with proficiency; therefore, over time, a gradual release of responsibility to students should play a key role in helping students read closely. Building students’ awareness of the moves they can make as close readers helps students take responsibility for their own learning and make decisions about how and when to read closely (including knowing when *not* to read closely, given their purpose or the demands of the task).

¹ Definition based on the work of Nancy Boyles, Cheryl Dobbertin, and Timothy Shanahan.



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Planning

Evaluate the Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine the purpose for reading. What will students understand or do with the information they acquire? • Look ahead: Where is the work with this particular text heading in terms of the larger arc of learning (the unit or module)? Why do students need the information in this text? What is the assessment? What is the performance task? Do students need to read primarily to build content knowledge or do they also need to read to analyze author’s craft? • Choose compelling texts and/or be able to explain why a particular text was chosen: What makes this text worth reading? Does the text offer a particularly good opportunity to teach a particular Common Core reading standard?
Analyze the Text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In what ways is this text complex? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Quantitative: What is the Lexile level or Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level? What do these scores tell you about the text’s sentence complexity and the number of complex words that students will encounter? – Qualitative: Consider four “quadrants”² of text complexity³: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What background knowledge and experience does the author of this text presume readers will bring to the text? 2. How complex is the language (vocabulary and figurative language)? 3. How complex is the meaning (complex concepts, multiple layers of meaning)? 4. How complex is the structure (organization, genre, text features, and syntax)? • What excerpts are particularly critical or difficult (either because of complexity or importance) that students will read them slowly, deeply, more than once, and with support? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Which sections of the text provide the opportunity to build the knowledge, understanding, or skills aligned with your instructional focus? – What essential parts at the start of the text, if not understood, will steer students in the wrong direction? • Focus on key academic vocabulary. What vocabulary students might be able to learn in context, and what words will need to be defined in advance or after a first read? • Given your analysis of the text, decide: Can students first “have a go” on their own and then hear the text read aloud after? Or should students first hear a particularly critical or difficult passage read aloud?

² Adapted with permission from the Vermont Writing Collaborative.

³ Note: for texts to be considered “complex,” they do not need to be complex in all four of these areas.

Planning (continued)

Generate Text-Dependent Questions⁴

- Generate text-dependent questions that **scaffold students’ understanding** of the text and **lead to the big ideas**.
- Write questions that address **all four quadrants** as needed – that help build students’ background knowledge, and lead students to understandings of the text’s meaning, structure, and use of language.
- Based on your teaching purpose, design an overarching or **“focus question”** that focuses students on the big ideas of the text. Plan to revisit this question both throughout a close reading and after (to help students synthesize their understanding of the text).
- Based on your analysis of the four quadrants and your teaching focus, **prioritize the challenges** you anticipate students will face.
- Design question sequences that **build confidence** and scaffold understanding. Start small with “right there” questions and build up to questions that require students to infer or synthesize. Create a logical sequence of questions where the answering of previous questions supports answering subsequent ones.
- Design questions that focus on important domain specific and academic **vocabulary** students are likely to encounter in other texts within and beyond this topic.
- Design questions that require students to reference evidence in the text, but also allow for **active participation**. What might students sketch, act out, sort, or debate? How might you get students moving and collaborating as they answer text-dependent questions?
- After having generated possible text-dependent questions, revisit your purpose in order to **prioritize your questions**. Focus on the challenges of the text itself and the goals for the lesson. Focus on asking questions about sections of the text that are most central to your teaching purpose.
- Maintain a **balance between close reading and engagement**. Consider how many times students will need to reread a piece or excerpt and how many text-dependent questions are necessary.
 - How will you **share with students why reading this particular text closely is important**? How will it help us understand more about the topic we are studying? What learning can we generalize to other areas of study?
 - How can you **keep the purpose for close reading alive** throughout the lesson?
 - Will another rereading or series of text-dependent questions encourage students to dig deeper and uncover intriguing nuances? Or will it begin to dampen students’ interest in the text and excitement for the topic?

⁴ Adapted from Student Achievement Partners’ “Guide to Creating Text-Dependent and Specific Questions for Close Analytic Reading.”

Instruction	
Launching the Text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students read chunks of text on their own, or the teacher reads aloud (slowly, perhaps twice, with students following along to promote fluency). • Students may need you to provide support with vocabulary before reading the text. Do this sparingly. Teaching too many words before students read a text will overload their working memory; students have more support when learning words in context.
Students Independently Making Meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Typically, students reread chunks on their own for gist – their initial sense of what the text is mostly about. Or they may reread to think about what surprises them, to find unknown words, or to track their questions. Students often make notes in the margins based on the specific purpose. This early work rereading a text helps students grapple with the meaning of the text and build perseverance. • Support individual students as needed. This may include rereading aloud with a small group, providing a glossary of definitions of key words students cannot determine from context, or chunking the text into more manageable excerpts. • Students discuss what they currently understand about the text as their teacher listens in.
Scaffolding Understanding Through Text-Dependent Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frame the focus question to introduce or re-introduce the purpose. • Guide students to reread sections of the text and answer text-dependent questions (literal ones as well as those that require students to infer, synthesize, analyze, or evaluate). • Students think and discuss their answers in pairs or groups, focusing on details from the text. • Students write answers to questions (sentences, graphic organizer, note-catcher, or recording form) or share answers orally in response to teacher prompting (oral processing is powerful, yet writing is the best way to solidify and ensure each student’s understanding). • Through a well-crafted sequence of questions, prompt for evidence, probing in the following ways: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – What does the text say? – What evidence do you have for that? – Is your evidence accurate? Relevant? Complete?
Formative Assessment	
Synthesize	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using the focus question, connect the close reading students did in this specific lesson to the larger purpose. • Ask students to synthesize their understanding of the text through discussion and written response to the focus question. • To inform future instruction (including requisite differentiation), collect students’ responses to text-dependent questions and the focus question. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Are their patterns of misunderstanding of the text that could be addressed in subsequent lessons? – Do certain students need more individualized support?

Formative Assessment (continued)

Debrief	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Help students reflect on how well they are acquiring the expected knowledge and skill. Ultimately, students will apply their learning from this text by selecting details as they complete research or writing tasks.<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Ask students if they have gained the intended information?– Ask if they are prepared to use their learning in future research or writing?• Guide students to self-assess and set goals for future experiences reading closely. In what ways are they becoming increasingly proficient and independent as readers of complex text?
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