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CLOSE READING IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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# CLOSE READING IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

Douglas Fisher ■ Nancy Frey

*With some modifications, close reading is an instructional approach that can be added to the repertoires of elementary school teachers.*

The adoption of the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts has focused teachers on the practice of close, analytic reading. This has generated some debate as various stakeholders discuss the merits of this approach (e.g., Gewertz, 2012).

Close reading is an instructional routine in which students critically examine a text, especially through repeated readings. This practice has been used at the secondary and college levels (e.g., Richards, 1929), but specific research on the implementation of close reading with elementary students is lacking.

Close reading invites students to examine the deep structures of a piece of text, or, as Alder and Van Doren (1940/1972) described it, to “x-ray the book... [for] the skeleton hidden between the covers” (p. 75). These deep structures include the way the text is organized, the precision of its vocabulary to advance concepts, and its key details, arguments, and inferential meanings.

Importantly, these deep structures must also include consideration of the author’s purpose, how these ideas connect to other texts, and the ways the

reader can consolidate this information to formulate opinions. The primary objective of a close reading is to afford students with the opportunity to assimilate new textual information with their existing background knowledge and prior experiences to expand their schema. The challenge is in not becoming so focused on background knowledge and prior experiences such that we end up spending little time on the textual information. Activation alone, although important, doesn’t expand knowledge.

A second purpose of a close reading is to build the necessary habits of readers when they engage with a complex piece of text. These include building stamina and persistence when confronted by a reading that isn’t easily consumed. In addition, students need to build the habit of considering their own background knowledge when there isn’t someone prompting

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them to do so. Paul and Elder (2003) recommended that students regularly engage in four such habits:

1. Identifying their own purpose for reading the text
2. Determining the author's purpose for writing it
3. Developing their own schema
4. Considering the thought systems of a discipline, or what we might call genres and discipline-specific language (e.g., a poem differs from a science article)

Elementary teachers routinely teach all of these habits because they know each are vital to reading development. However, it is less common to fully integrate these habits within the context of a more difficult piece of text. The practice of close reading affords us an instructional place to do so.

Moreover, close reading must be accompanied by other essential instructional practices that are vital to reading development: interactive read-alouds and shared readings, teacher modeling and think-alouds, guided reading with leveled texts, collaborative reading and discussion, and independent reading and writing. To abandon these practices in favor of close reading exclusively would be akin to having a toolbox with only one tool in

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it. As the old saying goes, “when all you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail.”

Which brings us to the topic of when *not* to do a close reading. Not all text warrants this kind of attention. There's no reason to do a close reading of an easily understood and simply organized piece of text. In other cases, it's the reader's purpose for reading that determines whether close reading is required. We don't need to read closely when we are simply skimming today's headlines on a newsfeed. When a story captures our attention, however, we downshift in order to read more closely. But how do we do so?

Newkirk (2011), an advocate of what he calls “slow reading,” says that “it has to do with the relationship we have with what we read, with the quality of attention that we bring to our reading, with the investment we are willing to make” (p. 2). At its heart, close reading is about showing our students that some texts are worth that level of attention, and moreover, teaching them how to become fully immersed in texts to analyze “both the openness and the constraint offered by the text” (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. x).

### Investigating Close Reading

To determine whether close reading might be an appropriate instructional routine for elementary school students and to learn about modifications

that might be necessary to effectively implement this procedure with students in grades K–6, we asked a group of elementary principals to identify their highly effective teachers who could collaborate with us to explore close reading.

From the list of potential participants, we identified 14 teachers, each with more than a decade of experience, two from each grade level from kindergarten through grade 6, who agreed to participate in our investigation. In small groups of at least six based on availability, we set out to observe secondary teachers who engaged in close reading instruction.

The 10 secondary demonstration teachers were purposefully selected on the basis of their approach to teaching texts. Five of the teachers we observed were English teachers, three were social studies teachers, and two were science teachers. All 10 were credentialed and teaching in their appropriate disciplinary fields. After each observation, the observing team discussed aspects of close reading and how these approaches might work for elementary-age students.

To find out the answer to our first question, identifying aspects of close reading that should be implemented with elementary school students, we took a key informants perspective in which we purposefully selected elementary teachers who could identify effective practices and secondary

### Pause and Ponder

- What components of close reading are evident in the classrooms I visit and which could be added?
- When does a text need frontloading or preteaching and when does it not?
- What types of questions can teachers and students ask that require evidence from the text?

## CLOSE READING IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

teachers who were skilled in the practice we wanted to observe.

We collected field notes during each of the 10 observations of secondary teachers and during each of the discussions between observing and demonstration teachers that followed each event. In addition, we collected field notes in each of the 14 elementary classrooms of the observing teachers as they began implementing close reading in their own practice.

### Key Features of Close Reading

Over the course of the 10 observations, we identified 5 features that differed from most reading instruction in elementary school classrooms. As each of these features was discussed, we realized that they would have to be addressed if close reading were going to be implemented in elementary schools.

#### Short Passages

The most obvious feature was the length of the texts that were used in close readings. As one of the observers noted, "I expected high school students to be reading much longer pieces." The selections that were used for close readings ranged from three paragraphs to two pages. Sometimes these passages were selected from a longer text, and sometimes they were stand-alone readings. When asked about the length of the text selections for close reading, a demonstration English teacher commented, "My students read longer pieces on their own. When we really dig into a text, I use a shorter piece so that I can teach them skills for interrogating the ideas in the text."

#### Complex Texts

The texts that demonstration teachers selected for close reading were complex.

As one of the observers noted, "The texts we saw being taught seemed to be pretty hard; way above the independent reading level of most students." Another said,

When they did close readings, it's like they were in college. But I also saw that students had some popular books on their desks, like [Suzanne Collins's] *The Hunger Games* and [Jay Asher's] *13 Reasons Why*. I thought it was important to note that they were teaching from harder texts rather than assigning them as homework.

#### Limited Frontloading

The most surprising feature was the near lack of frontloading and preteaching. The secondary teachers we observed rarely commented about the text itself before asking students to read it. They consistently set a purpose for reading, but did not engage in lengthy conversations about the meaning of the text or what students should expect to find in the text in advance of the reading.

As one of the elementary observers commented, "I usually spend about 10–15 minutes talking with students before we get to the text itself." Another said, "These teachers might give a few definitions of really obscure words, but they really make the text the most important thing." Another commented,

I was really worried about some of the students and if they would be able to handle the text. I expected that the teacher would talk more about what they would find in the text and then make some personal connections with students.

#### Repeated Readings

In every observation, students read and reread the text several times. With

each successive reading, students were provided a purpose or a question that seemed to influence their repeated reading. As one of the observers noted, "I was shocked that the students were reading these texts over again. The first time we saw a group rereading, I thought it was a fluke. But every classroom did it."

Another said, "What I noticed was that when they reread, they had more background knowledge from the previous readings, and their conversations, so that they understood more each time." Another said, "It was the questions that got them to reread." Still another offered,

The teachers never read the text out loud the first time, but they all ended up reading aloud at some point. And when they did, they had a lot of different emphasis, and the students followed along with their eyes, even when they had already read the text.

#### Text-Dependent Questions

We also noted that the questions the demonstration teachers asked required students to provide evidence from the text in their responses, as in the case of Right There, Think and Search, and Author and You questions as part of Question–Answer Relationship (QAR) (Raphael, 1986). These questions assisted in getting students to reread and in fostering conversations between students in small groups.

As one of the observers commented, "They didn't ask a lot of questions about the students' personal experiences. The questions really did require the students

*"The questions the demonstration teachers asked required students to provide evidence from the text in their responses."*

*“We also agreed that students should reread the text several times and that students should provide evidence from the text in their responses.”*

to explain where they found it in the text.” Another said,

The questions were not just recall questions. Some were about the details, but many were about the bigger ideas within the text and the interesting information from the text. I even found myself going back to find the information because it was really interesting.

### **Annotation**

During the close readings we observed, secondary students regularly underlined, circled, and wrote margin notes. In some cases, they wrote on bookmarks or self-sticking notes, and in other cases they wrote directly on the text.

As one of the observers noted, “They underlined like they were in college.” Another said, “They could find the evidence they needed pretty quickly because they had written in or around the texts.” One of the demonstration teachers explained how he used student annotations formatively:

As they’re reading, I walk around to see what they’re doing. I have them circle confusing sections because I can spot it easily. When I see a pattern, like lots of kids circling the same section, I know where I’m going to need to model and think aloud.

### **Modifying Close Reading for Elementary Schools**

When the observers met with us to discuss the ways in which close reading could be implemented in their elementary school classrooms, we agreed on several features that did not

require significant modification. First, we agreed that the selected texts should be complex, at least at grade level if not above grade level, and worthy of extended classroom time. Second, the passages selected for close reading should be short and should include a wide range of genres and types.

We also agreed that students should reread the text several times and that students should provide evidence from the text in their responses. However, there were several areas that we agreed needed to be modified to ensure that close reading was an effective approach that could be added to the instructional repertoires of elementary school teachers.

### **Who Is Reading?**

In elementary school classrooms, there are situations in which the teacher does the reading, as is often the case in kindergarten and first grade. Although many of the close readings eventually conducted by teachers in the upper grades begin with an initial independent reading, close readings in the primary grades often begin with the teacher reading the text aloud as a shared reading.

As one of the participants noted,

If we want to maintain the complexity of the text for a close reading in kinder or first grade, then we might have to read it to them. I’m thinking about this as habit building, a way of thinking about texts. If we only used texts students can read for close reading, there probably wouldn’t be as many ideas for them to talk about.

Of course they could reread the texts they can read, and they should because it works on fluency, but I’m thinking that the really deep conversations that we need to have are probably better when we use harder books.

This was an important decision for the observing teachers in grades K–3 because it gave them a new understanding of the read-aloud text exemplars in Appendix B of the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association, 2010).

For example, during a close reading of *How People Learned to Fly* (Hodgkins, 2007) in a first-grade classroom, the teacher read the text aloud, whereas during a close reading of a section of *We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball* (Nelson, 2008) in a fifth-grade classroom, the students first read the text. As the first-grade teacher noted,

There are some difficult words in this book, but the ideas are clearly presented. I wanted my students to focus on the ideas and find evidence from the text for their responses. I work on their decoding and fluency skills as well, but not as part of my close reading. I really want to guide them to find evidence from the text, so I decided that I would do the first reading. Did you notice that they were rereading and looking for evidence later in the lesson?

The fifth-grade teacher said,

This is a hard text, with some long sentences and complex ideas. But I wanted them to encounter it on their own first and to see what caught them off-guard. I chose the third section, “Life in the Negro Leagues,” for the close reading because I wanted them to consider people’s life at the time.

### **Frontloading**

The issue of frontloading was a contentious one, with significant disagreement about the issue at the outset of our discussions. As one of the participants noted, “I have a reading specialist credential and master’s degree.

*“[The group agreed] not every text needed frontloading and that this scaffold had probably been overused in the past.”*

Background knowledge is a significant predictor of comprehension, so we have to make sure that students have the background knowledge necessary before we have them reading.”

Another responded, “I agree, but I’m not sure that we have to tell them all of the background knowledge upfront. What if the repeated readings help build background or if background is developed as part of the questions that are asked?” Another person commented, “I just worry about our English learners and if they will be able to get anything out of the text if we do it this way.”

Over several conversations, the group focused on the role of frontloading and when it might be appropriate. They came to an agreement that not every text needed frontloading and that this scaffold had probably been overused in the past. As the reading specialist said, “I keep thinking about this, and I think that I’ve done the heavy lifting in the past. There are some texts that require some frontloading, but not all of them. I’ve frontloaded every text we’ve read this year.”

Another teacher, building on this comment, said, “I’m in a different place now. I think we have to get the students to do the heavy lifting now and part of that is to make sure that students are thinking about the text each time they read it.”

Rather than ban frontloading or preteaching, the group discussed situations in which frontloading would likely be necessary, such as when a vocabulary term was not used in a way the students could figure it out using contextual or structural analysis. In doing so, they agreed to two additional criteria: (1) that frontloading not remove the need to read the text, and (2) that frontloading not take readers away from the text to their own experiences too soon.

They recognized that this second criteria was necessary if students were to integrate textual information into their existing schema. “They can get so caught up in what they already know that the new information doesn’t get its proper due,” said a third-grade teacher. “The right time to ask about their personal experiences is when they’ve gained this strong foundation of new knowledge,” she continued. “Then it’s more challenging because now they have to weigh what they already knew with the new stuff.”

In making the strategic decisions about frontloading, they focused on text complexity. As one of the members noted,

Right in the standards, it says that knowledge demands are one of the things that make a text complex. But that’s not the only thing that makes a text complex. According to the document [Common Core State Standards, Appendix A], texts can also be complex because of the levels of meaning in the text, the structure of the text, or the language conventions that are used. So, I think we need to make sure that we

analyze texts in advance to determine if background knowledge is really the issue that made the text complex.

Agreeing, a fifth-grade teacher said, “I think that I’ve frontloaded every text I’ve taught because I assumed that background knowledge was what made the text hard.” A first-grade teacher who read *Starfish* (Hurd, 2000) with her class added,

In the past, I would have asked students if they had ever seen a sea star, because I know that only about half of my students have ever been to the beach or an aquarium. But now that I think about it, I’m not sure what that does for them. Those who have probably activated their background knowledge from the title or illustrations and I would have wasted their time. Those who hadn’t probably didn’t get much from listening to the others who had seen a sea star before.

During an observation of a kindergarten classroom, the teacher pretaught the word *sense* before introducing the book *My Five Senses* (Ailiki, 1962). She told her students that their brains get information from the world around them and that this information was gathered through their senses. She then opened the book to the first page, on which there is a table labeled “My Five Senses” and said,

We know that senses are the way that our brains get information about the world around us. It says right here that there are five of them. This table has the words, “I see, I hear, I taste, I smell, and I touch.” That’s five, I’ll count them again. Yep, five. Five ways that our brains get information about the world around us. Turn to

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*“The group agreed that one of the most important things that teachers, irrespective of the grade they teach, need to know about close reading is the text itself.”*

your partner and name the five senses. [students turn to talk] Now, let’s see what the author teaches us about our senses.”

She then started to read the book to her students. When asked about her choice to frontload the word *sense*, she said,

In the past, I would have asked students a lot of questions about their senses before reading the book. Then I would have had them draw a person and label the senses, but I decided that I needed to get to what the author was really saying and get them reading; more eyes on print if you will. So, I didn’t want to risk that they would miss the first half of the book if they didn’t know sense, so I took about 90 seconds to give them some info.

The group agreed that one of the most important things that teachers, irrespective of the grade they teach, need to know about close reading is the text itself. Teachers have to read the text and consider what made it complex before trying to teach it. As one of the teachers noted,

It’s not like I can do a close reading of a text I don’t know well. I just think about how many times I have taught from the textbook, doing the whole prereading activity and asking all of the questions from the teacher edition. I, along with the textbook, was doing all of the work. Now, I read the text several times in advance and talk with my grade-level team about what made the text difficult. When I teach the text, I know that I can integrate some of the information that I used to frontload into my modeling, if students are having difficulty.

This is another important consideration for close readings:

Teachers can integrate modeling into the close reading lesson. There was a misunderstanding about this in our discussions, and several of the participants believed that the students did all of the reading and rereading. When we focused on specific aspects of our observations, we opened the conversation about the role of modeling in close reading. As one of the participants recalled,

I’m remembering a time when one of the English teachers reread a section of the poem and modeled her thinking. I could do that, but I’d want to base my modeling on areas of confusion. That means that I have to really listen to what the students are saying to figure out if there are things that still confuse them.

We observed this in a close reading of *The Raft* (LaMarche, 2000). The second-grade students had read a section of the text twice, looking for evidence in response to the question “Nicky draws a fawn on the raft. Why? What might this mean about the other animals drawn on the raft?”

The teacher reads aloud from the text, pausing to model her thinking about the text, saying,

So, I know that he saved a life and was very happy to see the doe and the fawn together again. That’s when he draws something on the raft and not the paper. So, I’m thinking that he decided to draw on the raft because this was the animal that was really, really important to him. He drew the heron on paper, but the fawn on the raft. Talk with your partners about what this might mean for the other animals that were drawn on the raft.

As the students interact, the teacher listens in for their interpretations and for their use of evidence from the text.

### ***Develop Text-Dependent Questions***

Similar to determining what makes a given text complex, restructuring the questions that teachers ask about texts also requires that teachers have read the selection in advance of teaching it. As the group discussed text-dependent questions, there was widespread acknowledgment that the questions that are often asked about texts encourage students to draw on their personal experiences rather than what the text had to offer. As an example, one of the group members offered this example:

On the day before we went to see the science teacher, I had taught a lesson about water and we read the book *A Drop of Water* (Wick, 1997). I asked students to talk about the size of a drop of water, about soap bubbles they have seen, and the different states of water, such as vapor and ice. I realize now that they could have had this whole conversation with me without ever reading the book.

*“Similar to determining what makes a given text complex, restructuring the questions that teachers ask about texts also requires that teachers have read the selection in advance of teaching it.”*

## CLOSE READING IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

This led to a conversation about how to form appropriate text-dependent questions. They drew on their experiences with QAR (Raphael & Au, 2005) as they discussed different ways to phrase questions, questions that specifically focused on the text and allowed students to consider evidence from the text, and we agreed on six broad categories. Examples of questions from each of the following categories from two books can be found in the Figure:

- *General understanding questions* draw on the overall view of the piece, especially the main ideas or arguments.
- *Key detail questions* are the who/what/when/where/why/how questions that are essential to understanding the meaning of the passage.
- *Vocabulary and text structure questions* bridge explicit with implicit meanings, especially in focusing on words and phrases, as well as the way the author has organized the information. Text structure questions may include text features and discourse structures (problem/solution, cause/effect, compare/contrast, etc.).
- *Author's purpose questions* draw the reader's attention to genre, point of view, multiple perspectives, and critical literacies, such as speculating on alternative accounts of the same event.
- *Inferential questions* challenge students to examine the implicitly stated ideas, arguments, or key details in the text.
- *Opinion and intertextual questions* allow students to use their foundational knowledge of one text to assert their opinions or to make connections to other texts, using the target text to support their claims.

We observed this type of questioning in a kindergarten classroom focused on the text *Hi! Fly Guy* (Arnold, 2005). The teacher had read the text aloud to students. The first questions she asked them to talk about focused on general understanding: What was the fly looking for? What was the boy looking for? The students immediately started talking about the boy's need for a pet and the fly's need for some food.

As Marco said to his partner, "The fly just wanted to eat something," to which his partner Maria added, "Yeah, but he liked slimy, like right here [pointing to the picture on page 2]." The teacher then asked, "Why did the judges say, 'He is a pet'?" and the students started talking with their partners again.

Javier said, "It's because he listens to Buzz." Aden said, "It's because he can do tricks." The teacher noted their

responses and then suggested that they review the book again, saying, "I think we should read this book again. We know a lot about Buzz and his pet, but there are some things that we might learn from reading again. Shall we?" All the students said "Yes!" and Sabrina added, "We should, because we always read books a lot of times."

The teacher read the text again, this time pausing on the word *pest*, and asked, "How does the author help us understand what a pest is?" Later, she asked, "Does this book entertain or inform us? Show me how." As they talked about these questions, the students recalled specific details from the text.

Alexis believed that the book was informing him, whereas Andrea said that it was to entertain because "nobody really would have a fly pet," to which Alexis responded, "It could be real. It could be a pet contest." The teacher then

Figure Sample Text-Dependent Questions

Question type	Questions from <i>Frog and Toad Together</i> (Lobel, 1971) in first grade	Questions from Chapter 10 in <i>A Night to Remember</i> (Lord, 1955) in sixth grade
General understandings	Retell the story using <i>first</i> , <i>next</i> , <i>then</i> , and <i>finally</i> .	Why would the author title the chapter "Go Away"?
Key details	What ways did they try to solve the problem of eating too many cookies?	What are two things that could have prevented this tragedy?
Vocabulary and text structure	How did the author help us to understand what <i>willpower</i> means?	How does the chronological structure help the reader understand the events?
Author's purpose	Who tells the story?	Whose story is most represented and whose story is under-represented?
Inferences	Do you think Toad's actions caused the seeds to grow? Why?	Why would Mrs. Brown run lifeboat number 6 with a revolver?
Opinions, arguments, intertextual connections	In your opinion, is Frog a good friend to Toad? Do you think this is a happy story or a sad one?	Compare this book with [Ken Marschall's] <i>Inside the Titanic</i> . What are the similarities and differences?

discusses realistic fiction with the class, saying,

Sometimes, authors use real events and then make up a story that probably didn't really happen. One of the ways we know for sure that it's fiction is when animals or insects talk. Fly Guy doesn't really talk so we have to think about who is telling the story: Buzz, the boy, or a narrator? How do you know?

The class decided to read the book once more, this time focused on who was telling the story. As a class, they decided that there was a narrator who told the story because of the pronouns that were used.

The last question the teacher asked was, "Do you think Fly Guy is happy being a pet? Why?" The group of students was split, with some of them believing that he was very happy because he had a good home and lots of food. Others said that he was not happy because he had to live in a jar and follow the rules of Buzz.

### **Teaching Annotation**

"Reading with a pencil," as the group started calling it, presented a challenge. Naturally, students could not write on all of the texts that were used instructionally. One teacher worried, "If we teach them to annotate, will they start doing it in books that they shouldn't and then get in trouble?"

Understanding the value of annotation in terms of focused attention to the text and the ability to retrieve evidence, the group nonetheless wanted to carefully consider the implications for elementary students. As another teacher commented,

We have a hard enough time getting them to understand the main idea, and I'm worried that they'll just underline and circle everything. We really have to develop a scope and sequence so that they learn some developmentally appropriate ways to annotate a text.

Annotation of text (the practice of making notes for oneself during reading) is an essential component of analytic reading (e.g., Adler & Van Doren, 1940/1972). As well, it is useful in analytic writing about text, as students consult their annotations to formulate arguments, analyze information, and make connections within and outside of the text.

Importantly, these annotations have a life beyond their initial construction. They are used in discussions, and some teachers even collect the annotated texts for the purpose of grading and assessment. In addition, students are expected to use their annotations in the development of their written products.

However, formal annotation has been traditionally associated with high school and college reading. At the elementary and middle school level, more informal annotative practices include making notes on stickies or on forms designed by the teacher. There has been comparatively less attention to what is done with these notes after the initial reading.

Unfortunately, the majority of elementary students have limited experience with annotation, and many teachers have a concomitant lack of experience in teaching it. The group developed a scope and sequence of this complex skill. Their intent was

to acknowledge the developmental learning needs of the students, as well as the teacher supports that would be needed. As the group continued to discuss annotation, we agreed on the following:

- Kindergarten—Use wiki sticks to underline key ideas in big books; develop notes collaboratively about books as part of interactive writing instruction.
- Grade 1—Use all of the above plus use wiki sticks in personal books.
- Grade 2—Phase out wiki sticks and introduce writing instruments to record notes on texts; continue interactive writing of notes.
- Grade 3—Use all of the above plus *underline* the major points in texts; use bookmarks to sticky notes to note key ideas; *circle keywords or phrases* that are confusing or unknown to you.
- Grade 4—Use all of the above, plus *use an exclamation mark (!)* for things that surprise you; write single-word comments in the margins.
- Grade 5—Use all of the above, plus *use a question mark (?)* for questions that you have during the reading and write your question in the margin; *Mark EX* when the author provides an example; write two- or three-word comments in the margins.
- Grade 6—Use all of the above, plus *draw an arrow (←)* when you make a connection to something inside the text or to an idea or experience outside the text.

Using a tip from Newkirk's (2011) work, the group recommended that beginning in grade 4, students

*"Reading with a pencil,' as the group started calling it, presented a challenge."*

*“By taking a measured approach to what has traditionally been regarded as a secondary and postsecondary skill, these teachers were able to make some informed modifications that take their younger students’ development, cognition, and metacognition into account.”*

would have experiences with annotation on large sheets of paper. They would photocopy a page or two from a text they were reading and have the students affix it to a legal-sized sheet of blank paper to create a blank border around it. These spaces became the margins where they could write notes and questions for themselves.

One of the fourth-grade observing teachers began using these annotated sheets as the foundation for small-group discussions. “I intersperse lots of small group discussion within my close reading lessons,” he began. “I found that their annotations became a good platform for launching into discussions of the text, what confused them, or what other questions the reading prompted in their minds.” A fifth-grade teacher shared that she had begun using these annotated sheets for assessment purposes. “I have a simple rubric for quality annotations that I’ve taught them, and their annotations give me some insight into the depth of their comprehension,” she said.

### **Building an Instructional Routine**

The practice of close reading is one that many elementary teachers are less

familiar with, and there is a paucity of research on how this should be reinterpreted for elementary students. The purpose of this investigation was to follow a group of dedicated K–6 teachers as they observed, discussed, and implemented close reading in their own classrooms.

By taking a measured approach to what has traditionally been regarded as a secondary and postsecondary skill, these teachers were able to make some informed modifications that take their younger students’ development, cognition, and metacognition into account. Rather than viewing the practice of close reading monolithically, they followed the advice of Rosenblatt (1978) to consider “both the openness and the constraints” (p. x) of this instructional routine.

Although this work represents an early effort in developing close reading as an elementary practice, as a profession we can collectively look forward to our deepening understanding of it as others share their experiences. After all, it was only a few decades ago that conventional wisdom dictated that children should not be introduced to reading until the latter

half of first grade. Who knows what the limits of their comprehension might be?

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### **TAKE ACTION!**

- 1.** Select a text worthy of a deep investigation. Read it yourself at least twice to determine which aspects contribute to the complexity of the reading. Then, identify parts of the text that will require a close reading.
- 2.** From the text, identify several text-dependent questions that you might ask, depending on students’ conversations with each other and you. Refrain from providing too much background knowledge or frontloading, unless your analysis of text complexity suggests that this is the major contributor to potential errors.
- 3.** Invite students to read, and reread, text as they annotate, respond to questions, ask questions themselves, and dig deeply into the text.
- 4.** Reflect on this lesson. How did it feel to engage students in this way? How did students respond? What was their level of understanding? What could be revised to improve the close reading?

## MORE TO EXPLORE

### IRA Book

- Fisher, D., Frey, N., & Lapp, D. (2012). *Text complexity: Raising rigor in reading*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

### Even More!

- "Addressing the Complexity of Matching Readers With Text" (webinar) with Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Diane Lapp: [www.reading.org/General/Publications/webinars-archive/webinars-archive-fisher-frey-lapp.aspx](http://www.reading.org/General/Publications/webinars-archive/webinars-archive-fisher-frey-lapp.aspx)

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