



Common Core: Close Reading

Close reading is a natural fit for the Common Core, and easy to implement.

By Timothy Shanahan

Skinny jeans...chunky watches...celebrity chefs.... There are few things hotter right now than close reading. Ever since the Common Core State Standards burst onto the scene, close reading has been a matter of great curiosity. And no wonder! It's different from other reading approaches that schools have promoted in the past, so classroom routines meant to mint in-depth readers are pretty different, too.

So what exactly is close reading? How is it different from other reading instruction? And, most important, how can you make close readers out of your students? Let's take a close look.

■ Text Detectives

The first time I heard of close reading, I imagined sitting scrunched up with one of my daughters while I read her a good book. But reading closely isn't about building affection among readers. It is about getting readers to focus intently on the text—giving it a thorough examination to gather as much meaning as possible.

Close reading expects readers to focus on the information that a text provides, without relying on a lot of information or support. This is different from other kinds of reading lessons you teach, in which you may start out by introducing teacher-set purposes, discussions of students' life experiences, picture walks, and so on. Close reading discourages such front-loading. The goal of close reading instruction is to foster independent readers who are able to plumb the depths of a text by considering only the text itself.

■ Redefining Good Readers

We all know that it's not enough to just understand what a text says. Close readers not only grasp an author's message, but they also take a look under the hood, so to speak. They try to recognize the author's tone or perspective, the implications of the author's word choices, and why a text is structured or organized as it is. Additionally, readers should go beyond a text, evaluating its quality or value, comparing it with other texts, or determining its implications. It's a lot to ask of students, but with appropriate scaffolding and support, they can do it.

Anyone with doubts about how close reading ties into the Common Core standards should take a look at the organization of the reading standards: Standards 1, 2, and 3 emphasize identifying a text's key ideas or details (what the text says); standards 4, 5, and 6 focus on craft and structure (how the text works); and standards 7, 8, and 9 highlight the "integration of knowledge and meaning" (how the text measures up and compares to other texts). Close reading is unique because it has those three interpretive goals.

In the past, we may have thought students were good readers if they could tell that Goldilocks shouldn't have been in the bears' house or if they could predict what Baby Bear would find in his bed. In close reading, that's not enough. Close readers would wonder why the author had Goldilocks try out Papa Bear's, Mama Bear's, and Baby Bear's belongings in each episode, or why she is so hard on Baby Bear's stuff. (Goldilocks seems to want to grow up, but trying out grown-up stuff isn't getting her there, which raises

questions about what it takes to be grown up.) Great stories, and other quality texts, are coherent: How an author presents the text reinforces and extends the message itself. Good readers can make sense of this coherence and what it contributes to the meaning.

■ Close Reading in Action

Since close reading requires that students analyze the texts more thoroughly, a “one and done” reading is not enough. Students will need to read and reread the texts. Because there are three reading goals, plan to visit the text three separate times.

The first reading will focus on what the text says, the second reading will emphasize how the text works, and the third will engage students in evaluating the text, comparing it with other texts, or thinking about its implications in their lives.

In many ways, each of these reads will look like the reading lessons you’re already accustomed to teaching. You would assign portions of the text to read and follow up with a series of questions aimed at getting students to think about those portions of the text. (For examples of the kinds of questions, see bottom of page.) Or students might read the entire story or article first to make sense of what it says, and then, after a retelling, you could have them reread particular parts of the text relevant to the goals of the second and third reads.

■ Ready, Set, Read!

You’re ready to take your first journey through close reading. How do you set your students up for success? First, don’t keep it a secret that they’re going to read the text multiple times. We wouldn’t want them to think that we are going back because they missed something or did something wrong. Tell them about the kinds of things that they are trying to figure out by rereading. For example, you might say, “Good readers often read and reread a text, which is what we’ll do with this story. After we read it a first time, we’ll talk about what happened and who did what. After that, we’ll go back and reread some parts of the story to figure out how the text works and what choices the author made.”

It may also help to pre-teach difficult vocabulary words. Some teachers have expressed concern that they are no longer permitted to provide such assistance, but that is not the case. This kind of preparation is still useful and appropriate.

You’ll also want to briefly introduce the story. There is no need for an extensive overview. Sufficient introductions for a first reading would include: “We are going to read a story. We’ll read it to find out what the main character, Goldilocks, does and what happens to her.”

The questions that you’ll ask during each reading are extremely important because they should encourage a deep consideration of the text. These questions should also be “text dependent.” This means that students shouldn’t be able to answer them correctly if they haven’t read the text. Asking students, “How did Baby Bear feel about what Goldilocks did?” or “Why were the Bears upset?” are appropriate, but “Is it okay for children to go into someone else’s house?” would not be. That doesn’t limit you to low-level questions about what is stated explicitly in a text (for instance, “What was the little girl’s name?”). You can still require students to infer and interpret, but those interpretations should depend upon the ideas in the text. If the questions are truly text dependent, then students’ responses can easily be explained or supported with “evidence” drawn from the text.

■ Do’s and Don’ts

The Common Core envisions the transformation of all students into thoughtful readers. To make this vision a reality, you’ll need a variety of lessons aimed at creating close readers. Lessons can be delivered to whole classes of children, to small groups, and even one-on-one. Large group lessons are useful for exposing all

students to particular ideas, while smaller groupings encourage greater participation and allow for more observation.

Of course, not every text deserves a close read. Sometimes it's okay to be interested only in the story—considerations of craft and structure and deeper implications are beside the point. And classroom reads don't always have to emphasize close reading; the key is to incorporate close reading into your instruction, not use it exclusively. No one knows how many teacher-led close reads would be a good idea, but don't overdo it; one or two close reads every couple of weeks (some taking place over multiple days) seems like the right dosage. I predict close reading will still be in fashion when skinny jeans are long gone. And that is as it should be, given its emphasis on making children more thoughtful, independent readers.

Close Reading Questions

First Reading: Determine what the text says.

- What is the text about?
- What is the theme of the story?
- What was _____ (character) like, and what did he/she do in the story?

Second Reading: Figure out how the text works

- What does _____ (a word from the text) mean in this context?
- Who is telling this part of the story?
- What is the author's purpose for this section?

Third Reading: Analyze and compare the text

- What information do these illustrations add to the text? Or, how does this picture differ from what the author wrote?
- Compare _____ (an aspect of the text, such as character or main idea) with the same aspect in another text by the same author. (Readers can also examine texts on the same topic or from the same genre.)
- What reasons does the author give to support _____ (one of the ideas)?

Super Teacher:

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