**Guide to Close Reading**

**Close reading: What is it?**

The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (CCSS for ELA) ask students to read closely and carefully. They require that this careful, close reading be done with texts of greater complexity than has generally been the case in America’s public schools. Text complexity and the ability to rely on oneself to gain an accurate understanding of it are vital skills for the workplace, for college, and for citizenship.

The [PARCC Model Content Frameworks for ELA](http://www.parcconline.org/sites/parcc/files/PARCCMCFELALiteracyAugust2012_FINAL.pdf) defines close reading as follows:

Close, analytic reading stresses engaging with a text of sufficient complexity directly and examining its meaning thoroughly and methodically, encouraging students to read and reread deliberately. Directing student attention on the text itself empowers students to understand the central ideas and key supporting details. It also enables students to reflect on the meanings of individual words and sentences; the order in which sentences unfold; and the development of ideas over the course of the text, which ultimately leads students to arrive at an understanding of the text as a whole. Close, analytic reading entails the careful gathering of observations about a text and careful consideration about what those observations taken together add up to—from the smallest linguistic matters to larger issues of overall understanding and judgment.

**Why is close reading important?**

In the introduction to the CCSS for ELA, the authors make an explicit link between close reading and lifelong literacy:

As a natural outgrowth of meeting the charge to define college and career readiness, the Standards also lay out a vision of what it means to be a literate person in the twenty-first century. Indeed, the skills and understandings students are expected to demonstrate have wide applicability outside the classroom or workplace. Students who meet the Standards readily undertake the close, attentive reading that is at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex works of literature. They habitually perform the critical reading necessary to pick carefully through the staggering amount of information available today in print and digitally.

The Model Content Frameworks prioritize close reading: “A significant body of research links the close reading of complex text—whether the student is a struggling reader or advanced—to significant gains in reading proficiency and finds close reading to be a key component of college and career readiness.”

Close reading is perhaps the best strategy to help students meet the expectations of the CCSS for ELA, and can undergird student achievement across all the strands and Standards at each grade level. In particular, the following Standards are directly linked to close reading:

* Anchor Standards for Reading #1-6; #8: These Standards focus at each grade level on analyzing a text for meaning. In particular, Anchor Standard One asks students to: “Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.”
* Anchor Standards for Reading #7 and #9: These Standards ask students to focus carefully across multiple texts, including multimedia.
* Anchor Standard for Reading #10: “Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.” Close reading helps students understand complex text.
* Anchor Standard for Writing #9: “Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.”

**How is close reading done?**

There is no prescribed format for conducting a close reading exercise or planning a close reading lesson

Close reading depends on and values teachers’ judgment. It is built on their creativity and expertise at unpacking texts and in keeping students focused on the core ideas in the texts.

What unites all close reading lessons is that they always stress the importance of engaging with the text on its own merits rather than as a prompt for eliciting the personal experiences and feelings of students. These lessons share a few essential features:

* **The text is worth the time** you are asking students to spend on it. This “worth” can take several forms. The text can be useful because of the ideas and the content it is conveying, or it can be elegantly written and convey ideas beautifully. A text can be a seminal work for the subject area you are teaching. Once in a while, one text can be two or all of these things at once, but it should have at least one of these qualities.
* The **text of the exemplar is presented early within the lesson**, interrupted only by brief explanations of those words that cannot be determined from context.
* Students are asked to **read the text independently** early on, to **listen** **to the text selection** **read orally,** andto **return to the text repeatedly** to deepen their understanding during the course of a close analytic reading experience.
* **Subsections of the full passage are singled out** for rereading and investigating via questions that can only be answered by consulting the text carefully (text-dependent questions).
* **Academic (‘Tier 2’) vocabulary** and attention to complex and **difficult syntax** are particularly emphasized in discussion and in the text-dependent questions.
* **Discussing and writing about the text** as a primary means of deepening comprehension are always central activities. As a general rule, talking through ideas is called for before students are held accountable for a written response to the text.

Close reading can be conducted with a variety of texts. The Model Content Frameworks document offers this guidance:

Each module in the Model Content Frameworks suggests that educators select a minimum number of grade-level-appropriate short texts of sufficient complexity for close, analytic reading as well as one extended text. While short texts might include a poem, short story, or magazine article, extended texts might include novels or book-length informational texts, a magazine with a series of related articles or stories, or even a website with multiple related pages of grade-level complex text to navigate.

As to when or how often close reading should occur, there is no right answer. Close reading is a powerful instructional strategy, and like any strategy it is used best when teachers make decisions based on their understanding of the needs of their students as opposed to a pre-set formula or requirement.

Note that close reading lessons are in-depth reading exercises performed on a limited piece of text, like an article, essay, or poem. When reading a longer text, like a book, teachers can decide which excerpts to use for these lessons. Short text passages give students and teachers the time to engage closely with the details of a rich, complex text. If done regularly and over a long period of time, close reading lessons with short passages will build student capacity for close, analytic reading with longer texts, with the ultimate goal of students independently reading *all* texts they encounter in life, whether short or long, with a close, critical eye.

**Conclusion:**

Students and teachers are capable and even enthusiastic about the close reading of complex text once they have the chance to experience it. The need to read and then re-read texts two and even three times is exacting, and it requires determination on the part of teachers to encourage students who are unused to working so hard at reading. Teachers will quickly see just how strenuous close reading feels when it is not yet habitual. But even if students resist at first, it is worthwhile and necessary to persevere—to embrace the struggle, to allow for those few extra moments of thoughtful or frustrated silence, to let students discover the richness of the text themselves by unpacking it gradually. It is worthwhile for teachers to experience the same discomforts as their students—to make themselves aware of the difficulties and challenges posed by reading closely and focusing solely on the text. Teachers must practice patience and stamina so they can resist accommodating student pressure to “just give us the right answer.”

It is only if teachers give their students ample time to think through their responses and to repeatedly turn to the text before answering that students will be able to develop the habits of mind and the stamina to be independent readers. Given the chance and the time, students begin to glean more and more information from the text on their own and make increasingly more sophisticated inferences. They will edge ever closer to reading independence, as close reading becomes a habit rather than a chore.

Finally, close analytic reading is essential to student success but not sufficient by itself. Students need to read broadly and frequently to develop the vocabulary, stamina, and habits that characterize a strong reader. Schools and individual teachers have to find ways to bring a large quantity of reading back into the lives of far more students.

Source: Large selections drawn from the forthcoming collection of close reading exemplars, “Common Core Reader: For Teachers by Teachers,” compiled by David and Meredith Liben through funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.