

# Close Reading and the CCSS

## CLOSE READING DEFINED

Close reading is the methodical investigation of a complex text through answering text dependent questions geared to unpack the text’s meaning. Close reading directs students to examine and analyze the text through a series of activities that focus students on the meanings of individual words and sentences as well as the overall development of events and ideas. It calls on students to extract evidence from the text as well as draw non-trivial inferences that logically follow from what they have read.

This sort of careful attention to how the text unfolds allows students to assemble – through discussion and in writing – an overarching picture of the text as a whole as well as grasp the fine details on which that understanding rests. It prepares students for the kinds of detailed reading tasks they will encounter after graduation while leveling the playing field for all students by not privileging background knowledge. It motivates students by rewarding them for reading inquisitively and discovering the meaning and insight within the text that makes it worthy of attention.

## CLOSE READING AND THE CCSS

The **ANCHOR STANDARDS FOR READING** found in the Common Core State Standards prioritize the close reading skill of extracting evidence and making inferences (**STANDARD 1**) when reading complex text (**STANDARD 10**). All of the intervening standards (**STANDARDS 2-9**) call on students to answer specific text dependent questions – from determining the central idea or theme (**STANDARD 2**) to building knowledge by comparing two or more texts (**STANDARD 9**) – but each intervening standard critically relies on the core close reading skill of “citing specific textual evidence” when reading complex text to “support conclusions” (**STANDARDS 1 AND 10**). This text dependent approach is one of the key shifts embodied in the CCSS, and moving students and teachers towards understanding and embracing close reading when appropriate is a key step to implementing the CCSS.

## ELEMENTS OF CLOSE READING INSTRUCTION

- Focuses on those portions of a text (from individual words and sentences up to several paragraphs) that pose the biggest challenge to comprehension, confidence, and stamina
- Asks text dependent questions and assigns tasks that are neither overly general nor schematic, but rather direct students to carefully examine the unique text in front of them for evidence
- Not only poses questions about specific ideas within the text but also asks students to make inferences based on evidence beyond what is explicitly stated
- Helps students become aware of nuances in word meaning as well as acquire knowledge of general academic vocabulary to aid in understanding a wide range of complex texts
- Directs students to pay close attention to a variety of text structures, from the syntax of single sentences to the design of paragraphs or even pages of text
- Channels student focus on a sequential integrated line of inquiry directed at “unpuzzling” the text while keeping them actively engaged with what they read
- Stresses that students should synthesize the evidence they have gathered in an organized fashion and demonstrate their understanding both orally and through writing

## CLOSE READING AND BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Close reading highlights the central role the text should play in understanding what it means. Through asking questions that can only be answered by explicitly referring back to the text being read, close reading empowers students to use the text as a rich source for constructing knowledge. Close reading therefore does not rely on students possessing background knowledge or experiences to answer text dependent questions; instead it privileges the text itself and what information students can extract from what is before them.<sup>1</sup>

While close reading does not rule out the use of background knowledge, it raises crucial questions of when to access information outside of the text and what information to utilize. Students should first grapple with the text itself to determine what is confusing or unclear, and taught how to use the text to answer as many of those questions as they can. Only *if* students need additional information for the purpose of explicitly understanding the text should background knowledge be accessed or constructed. Background knowledge therefore does not replace or supersede the text, but buttresses student understanding after they have examined the text itself. Providing background knowledge *before* students read denies them the opportunity to develop the essential skill of determining what can be gleaned from the text and what requires additional outside clarification.

## CLOSE READING AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Effective ELL support results in the reader encountering the text on its own terms. Scaffolds and support therefore should not deliver to students a simpler source of information about the text either by translating its contents or preemptively announcing its focus or purpose (thereby diminishing the perceived need to read the text itself carefully). Instead, when students encounter difficulty in comprehension, support should explicitly redirect students back to the text with additional questions that help focus their attention on key phrases and statements or on the organization of ideas. Research shows that the most direct path towards developing proficient independent readers is by providing scaffolding that directly and consistently solicits evidence of student understanding and addresses confusions through text dependent questions. Therefore English Language Learner close reading instruction should offer the following:

- Provide the opportunity to work with high quality complex texts in a whole class setting
- Support weaker readers and encourages participation by privileging the text itself instead of prior knowledge
- Offer text-based strategies for grappling with text characteristics that challenge comprehension
- Equip students with the skills needed to understand unscaffolded text encountered on assessments and in college and career environments
- Strengthen reading comprehension through its focus on determining vocabulary in context
- Include effective scaffolding for complex text by asking text dependent questions

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1 It is important to distinguish between general background knowledge pertaining to vocabulary already acquired and ideas about how the world works versus specific background knowledge that would critically bear on interpreting the text. The point is not that students should be prevented from accessing prior background knowledge about the world or words that they already know in answering questions about the text; rather it is that students should have the opportunity to construct specific background knowledge acquired from close reading, rather than have it provided in advance.