

# CLOSELY READING INFORMATIONAL TEXTS IN THE PRIMARY GRADES

*Douglas Fisher ■ Nancy Frey*

**N**ell Duke sounded the alarm several years ago when she noted that many children do not have significant opportunities to engage with informational texts in the primary grades. In fact, she documented that first graders only engaged with informational texts about 3.6 minutes per day (Duke, 2000). Since then, there have been calls for increased use of informational texts in elementary classrooms. And there is good reason for this. Students in primary-grade classrooms need to become familiar with the characteristics and conventions of informational texts. Students also need to know that there are resources they can learn from that reflect the physical, biological, and social world around them, thus “building content knowledge that can influence their future sense-making of texts and also build their knowledge about the world” (Maloch & Bomer, 2013, p. 206).

Unfortunately, not all instruction with informational texts is worthwhile. As noted in Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards, “what little expository reading students are asked to do is too often of the superficial variety that involves skimming and scanning for particular, discrete pieces of information; such reading is unlikely to prepare students for the cognitive demand of true understanding of complex

text” (National Governors Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 3).

As “book whisperer” Miller (2013), noted, “We must look for meaningful ways to incorporate non-fiction texts into our daily instruction if we want students to read more of it” (p. 23). Most commonly, these recommendations focus on the use of informational texts in teacher read-alouds, guided small-group instruction, and independent reading (Morgan, Mraz, Padak, & Rasinski, 2008; Stead, 2014). In addition, there are recommendations that classroom libraries be filled with nonfiction and that students are regularly assigned writing tasks that allow them to apprentice into the world of factual and evidence-based writing (Duke, 2013).

The question is, are these approaches sufficient to radically change students’ understanding of informational texts? We’ve come to realize that the answer is no. These are all important aspects of instruction, but we believe that close reading of complex texts needs to be added to the range of instructional routines

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used in the primary grades. We think that some of the instructional minutes should focus on reading *stamina* while other time is spent on reading *strength*. It's rather like a fitness plan. To be competitive in swimming, soccer, or tennis, for example, athletes need both strength and stamina. So do readers.

At the global level, we define close reading as a careful and purposeful rereading of a complex text. The Aspen Institute, an educational and policy studies group with significant influence on practice, suggests the following (Brown & Kappes, 2012):

Close Reading of text involves an investigation of a short piece of text, with multiple readings done over multiple instructional lessons. Through text-based questions and discussion, students are guided to deeply analyze and appreciate various aspects of the text, such as key vocabulary and how its meaning is shaped by context; attention to form, tone, imagery and/or rhetorical devices; the significance of word choice and syntax; and the discovery of different levels of meaning as passages are read multiple times. (p. 2)

These definitions generally work to describe a set of experiences that students should have with text. What they don't provide is guidance on the differences that exist between closely reading in primary grades and close reading in the upper grades.

## Exploring the Differences in Close Reading

### Text Selection

Close reading is an instructional routine useful for building students' reading strength. As such, it is used with

complex texts. Given that students in the primary grades are learning to read, the texts used for close reading are typically much more difficult than those used for developing students' foundational skills. In the upper grades, the complex texts used for close reading are similar in terms of difficulty to those used in other instructional events. That doesn't mean the texts upper-grade students take home to read are as complex as those studied in class, because the at-home reading texts are serving a different purpose—namely, to build stamina.

For example, students in first grade might closely read *Starfish* (Hurd, 1962), which is significantly more difficult than a text that would be selected for scaffolded reading instruction or collaborative learning. Fourth graders might read a selection from *Toys! Amazing Stories Behind Some Great Inventions* (Wulffson, 2000), which is a text they might also read from as part of a reciprocal teaching group.

### Initial Read of the Text

Almost always, the initial read in a close reading in the primary grades is done by the teacher, whereas the initial read in the upper grades is typically done by students. Of course, there are texts that students in the primary grades can read initially read, such as *Truck* (Crews, 1980), a nearly wordless picture book, and texts that the teacher may need to initially read in the upper grades, such as *A History of US* (Hakim, 2005). In both primary- and upper-grade close reading lessons, students

*“Close reading is careful and purposeful rereading of complex text.”*

will likely need to reread to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities within the text. Students in the primary grades will probably miss the narrative of *Truck* as well as the different perspectives displayed by the author, not to mention the contents of the truck. Students in the upper grades may focus too literally on *A History of US* and not make connections with other events in U.S. history until they have a chance to more deeply investigate events and ideas.

### Annotation

Given the multiyear use of texts used in elementary school, students are not able to annotate directly on them. Creative teachers have solved this problem by inviting students to engage in annotation on SMART Boards, use Wikki Stix ([www.wikkistix.com](http://www.wikkistix.com)) to mark big books directly, or use self-sticking notes to record their ideas. For example, the students reading *Starfish* (Hurd, 1962) observed as their teacher added notes using stickies and a document camera to display the text.

When annotations are possible, teachers in the primary grades tend to annotate with and for students, whereas teachers in the upper grades tend to have students annotate more independently. However, we need to be careful about absolutes, as we have seen first-grade students accurately annotating texts and fourth-grade students being guided in annotations by their teacher.

*“We think some instruction minutes should focus on reading stamina while other time is spent on reading strength.”*

*“Teachers can collect annotations and determine the instruction their students need.”*

Over the course of their elementary experience, students should add to their repertoires of annotation. In other words, they should know more about annotation and have more ways to mark a text in fifth grade compared with second grade. Having said that, most successful schools are systematic about the annotation symbols that they teach. In these schools, students are not confused by the annotation system used from one text to the next, much less from one grade to another. We have identified three foundational annotation skills that all students should learn to use:

- Underlining central, key, or main ideas
- Circling words and phrases that are confusing or unclear
- Writing margin notes in their own words

These form the basis of the annotation system recommended by Adler and Van Doren (1940/1972). They also demand some fairly sophisticated skills from students. To identify the central, key, or main idea, students have to be thinking about important information contained within the text. Circling words and phrases that confuse them means that students are monitoring their understanding. And finally, writing margin notes means that students are summarizing and synthesizing the content of the text and the discussions they are having with peers.

There are two other points we'd like to make about annotations. The first is that students often stop annotating

after their initial interaction with the text. If this is allowed, then the evidence students use when they write about the text will be limited to their initial understanding. Students need to be reminded to update their annotations through the close reading lesson such that they develop a habit of doing this over time. Second, annotations are a great source of formative assessment data. Annotations allow teachers to get a glimpse into students' thinking while they read, not just after they've finished reading. Teachers would be wise to regularly collect their students' annotations and determine the type of instruction their students need in order to move to the next level.

### **Repeated Reading**

One of the key indicators that students are engaged in close reading is repeated reading. The texts selected for close reading are not likely to give up their deeper meanings easily or quickly. Thus, regardless of grade level, students should be expected to reread the text as part of a close reading lesson. In the primary grades, students may or may not do this independently. In some cases, the teacher is the person who rereads while students identify evidence. In other cases, students in the primary grades read sections of the text to locate the information they're looking for. Both of these happened while one group of kindergarten students was reading *The Day the Crayons Quit* (Daywalt, 2013). Anton asked his teacher to reread the letter from Blue Crayon so that his group

could identify the problem Blue Crayon needed to have solved. Another group was studying the final picture, in which Duncan, the boy who received the letters from the crayons, responded to their complaints. Students analyzed each image to determine whether or not Duncan had responded appropriately.

In the upper grades, students are most commonly the ones doing the rereading. That's not to say that the teacher wouldn't read the text aloud, perhaps at the third reading, to facilitate students' understanding. This is especially common when the text is a speech, contains dialogue, or if there is a recording done by the author. For example, a group of fifth graders was able to hear Langston Hughes read his poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" after having read and studied the poem several times ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mFp40WJbsA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mFp40WJbsA)).

In addition, students in the upper grades are often asked to read the text to their peers in small groups. Importantly, this is not done cold, on the first read of the text, but rather after several readings of the text. For example, as part of the close reading of Chief Joseph's "I Will Fight No More Forever" speech, groups of fifth-grade students asked members of their group to read the text aloud. Whatever the method, the point is that students across the grade levels have multiple interactions with the same text.

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**Text-Based Discussion**

Another key indicator that students are engaged in close reading is that they talk with one another about the text. A text that does not require peer-mediated learning is probably not a good one for close reading instruction. Texts that are worth a good conversation make for great close reading lessons.

In both the primary and the upper grades, students should be talking about the text. Of course, they have to be taught to have these types of discussions. We have seen students, having experienced a lot of close reading lessons, automatically engage in the kind of thinking and talking that should be the norm. But most students need to be asked questions about the text to prime their discussions. That's not to say that they must remain exclusively focused on the answers to the questions or that they won't generate their own questions, but rather that the questions serve as fodder for their interactions.

There are levels of questions that serve as a scaffold for students'

understanding. Initial readings and discussions of the text focus at the literal level, with students exploring what the text actually says. Later readings of the text focus on the structural meaning of the text, when students consider how the text works. As their understanding develops and deepens, the focus becomes about meaning and the logical inferences they can make from the text. This often requires that students read multiple texts to deepen their understanding of the ideas contained therein.

Figure 1 contains a list of these three levels, general content that can be covered in each of the levels, and some sample questions from *How People Learned to Fly* (Hodgkins, 2007). The first graders who read this text engaged in a number of conversations that allowed them to return to the text to find evidence in support of their answers. Importantly, the questions moved beyond the literal recall level and their discussions about what the author was trying to teach readers was powerful, as group after group realized that one message of the text

was that people had to keep trying when they had a problem they wanted to solve. As Marcello said, "They never gave up. They just kept trying to fly." Aracelli responded, "Yeah, it didn't work when they put the wings on. They had to try again. They had to invent a machine."

**Responding to the Text**

Close reading should result in something. We like to ask students, "What does the text inspire you to do?" In some cases, students want to engage in further learning, research, or investigation. In other cases, they want to present their ideas to other people. In still other cases, they want to discuss or debate the ideas they have garnered from a text or set of texts. And in still other cases, students want to write in response to what they have read.

There are a lot of similarities in response options between the primary and upper grades. The main difference is the type of support provided for students. As a few examples of primary-grade responses, the students who read

**Figure 1** Sample Text-Dependent Questions

Phase	Content Components	Sample Questions
1) What does the text say?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General understanding</li> <li>• Key details</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What did people want to do?</li> <li>• Why is flying important?</li> <li>• What would happen if there was no gravity?</li> <li>• What did people attempt to do to be more like birds?</li> </ul>
2) How does the text work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vocabulary</li> <li>• Text structure</li> <li>• Author's craft</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain drag. How are force and drag connected?</li> <li>• What is gravity? Why is it important to understand gravity?</li> <li>• The author uses birds a lot to explain the concept of flight. How did birds influence the concept of flight for humans?</li> <li>• Look at the information in the figures again. Why does the author include them?</li> </ul>
3) What does the text mean?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inferences</li> <li>• Opinions and arguments</li> <li>• Intertextual connections</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the author teaching us as readers?</li> <li>• Why is it important to study how people attempted different things in order to fly?</li> <li>• How are planes used today?</li> <li>• What are the different purposes that planes serve?</li> <li>• Read a book about the Wright brothers or Charles Lindbergh. Compare which components of their flight attempts were successful and which ones weren't. What made them famous? How did their decisions influence flight today?</li> </ul>

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Figure 2 Comparing Close Reading in Primary and Upper Grades

Close Reading in Primary Grades	Elements	Close Reading in Upper Grades
Text complexity is significantly higher than students' reading level.	<i>Text Selection</i>	Text complexity is only slightly higher than texts the students take on during other phases of reading instruction.
The teacher is reading the text aloud to students, although they are not grasping its deeper meaning. The text may or may not be displayed.	<i>Initial Reading</i>	Students are more likely to read the text independently, although they are not fully grasping its deeper meaning.
The teacher guides annotation practices using displayed text and fosters collaboratively developed annotations.	<i>Annotation</i>	Students familiar with annotation practices are marking text independently and adding to their annotations throughout class discussions.
The teacher reads aloud multiple times. Students may read along at the paragraph, sentence, phrase, or individual word level. A few students may read the text independently in subsequent readings due to practice effects.	<i>Repeated Readings</i>	Students are rereading independently or with minimal support. Students may also have access to audio supports (a poet reading her poem, a teacher reading dialogue, a peer reading a key sentence).
<i>Text-Based Discussions</i>		
Students engage in extended discussion, which is driven by text-dependent questions and dialogic teaching. Students deepen their understanding through analysis of the literal, structural, and inferential dimensions of the text.		
Students draw and write collaboratively and independently, with adult support and guidance. They engage in shared investigations and debate compelling questions.	<i>Responding to Texts</i>	Students write collaboratively and independently. They investigate, research, and debate compelling questions.

*How People Learned to Fly* (Hodgkins, 2007) wanted to learn more about flight and launched into a unit investigating transportation. The students who read *The Day the Crayons Quit* (Daywalt, 2013) discussed the ways in which Duncan responded to the letters and then wrote a response letter back to an assigned crayon explaining the solution. The students who read *Starfish* (Hurd, 1962) worked in groups to summarize various sections of the text.

In the upper grades, students also write, investigate, discuss, debate, and present. The students who read *Toys! Amazing Stories Behind Some Great Inventions* (Wulffson, 2000) engaged in several response activities, including additional research about a toy of their choice, a presentation on their research to other members of the class, a whole-class discussion about the characteristics of inventors, and a response to a writing prompt that required students to

analyze similarities in the development of at least two different toys.

Figure 2 contains a summary of the ideas we have presented about the differences between close reading in the primary grades and close readings in the upper grades. It is important to note that we hope close reading of complex informational texts is added to the literacy frameworks that teachers use. Students should still experience read-alouds, shared readings, scaffolded small-group instruction, and collaborative reading activities such as book clubs and reciprocal teaching.

### Keep Development in Mind

As we wrote this column, we had lots of discussion about whether we should even create a chart, for fear that it might be misunderstood. By that, we mean that it is not our intention to create a solid line of division between grade levels, with no thought to the context, the

selected text, or the needs and strengths of students. We wouldn't want anyone to feel as though they must put aside what they know about their students because of a chart in *The Reading Teacher*. The truth is that young children develop skills and reading behaviors through effective teaching. And good teachers are always thinking far ahead of today's lesson. Teachers in the spring of every year begin to introduce a few new skills that their students will be using more fully in the next grade level. Rest assured that you should experiment to discover what children may be capable of doing next. Close reading is a time when teachers can stretch students' listening and reading comprehension. If you're noticing that students are getting a little too independent, revisit the text selection process. That independence you're witnessing during close reading may be a signal that it's time to increase the text complexity.

## CLOSELY READING INFORMATIONAL TEXTS IN THE PRIMARY GRADES

Finally, a word on using close reading instructional routines in the upper grades. In the same way that good primary teachers think about developmental needs, so do those who teach in the upper grades. Access to text is important, and some upper-grade students may need to hear the text being read aloud initially, even as others are reading the same text independently. There are times when the whole class needs the teacher to do more guided annotations in order to strengthen students' skills. Upper-grade teachers should make decisions based on their students' needs and adjust accordingly. In fact, that is a hallmark of good instruction with informational texts.

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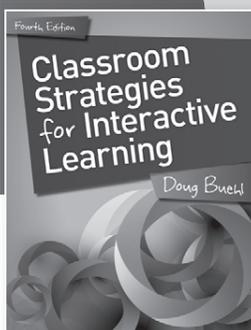
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