

# BUILDING THE FOUNDATION FOR CLOSE READING WITH DEVELOPING READERS

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## ABSTRACT

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*Close Reading utilizes several strategies to help readers think more critically about a text. Close reading can be performed within the context of shared readings, read-alouds by the teacher, literature discussion groups, and guided reading groups. Students attempting to more closely read difficult texts may benefit from technologies and platforms that support their diverse reading levels, abilities, and special needs during close reading activities. The authors identify technologies which enable teachers to embed multimedia, interactive activities, and questions and activities that promote critical thinking and which guide readers to take a closer look at the content of their texts.*

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Close reading is a term that has been with us for some time. As early as 1838, Horace Mann wrote,

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*I have devoted especial pains to learn, with some degree of numerical accuracy, how far the reading, in our schools, is an exercise of the mind in thinking and feeling and how far it is a barren action of the organs of speech upon the atmosphere (p, 531)....The result is, that more than eleven-twelfths of all the children in the reading classes, in our schools, do not understand the meaning of the words they read; that they do not master the sense of the reading-lessons, and that the ideas and feelings intended by the author to be conveyed to, and excited in, the reader's mind, still rest in the author's intention, never having yet reached the place of their destination (p. 532).*

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For decades, close reading has been promoted in classrooms where teachers challenge students to delve into text to think on higher levels. Adler and Van Doren (1972) suggest that students become the detectives in dealing with the text as they explore the layered structures of a text.

Boyles (December, 2012/January, 2013) agrees that close reading involves reading to uncover layers of meaning that lead to deeper comprehension.

Lapp, Grant, Moss, and Johnson (2013) characterize close reading as “one type of classroom reading in which a small or large group of students ‘have a go’ at a text” (p. 110). Delving deeper to take a more critical look at text proves fruitful for students. While there has been some controversy over the idea of close reading and its use with developing readers, several researchers point out that, at the very least, we can take on practices that lay the foundation for this very important skill (Beers & Probst, 2012). Developing learners’ ability to read more closely at an early age helps to build a

strong foundation in reading. This foundation of strong reading skills is built upon throughout their school years and helps to prepare them for college and careers. “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” (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, 2011, p. 7). Much of the literature in the education field regarding close reading centers on the secondary school group. The authors contend that readers of all ages can participate in this type of reading. Developing readers can begin to navigate the use of various strategies such as making connections, drawing on prior knowledge, identifying what is not being addressed in a text, and analyzing what the author might have meant. Included here is a basic rationale for introducing close reading in early elementary grades, suggested activities, and possible question stems. Also discussed are technology applications that help students navigate digital texts, providing critical skills and strategies for comprehending and embracing today’s digital world.

## REVISITING THE TEXT

Close reading of text involves an investigation of a short piece of text, with multiple readings completed 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 or syntax; and the discovery of different levels of meaning as passages are read multiple times” (Brown & Kappes, 2012, p. 2).

Fisher and Frey (2012) describe close reading as “students examining the deep structures of a text and this includes the way the text is organized, the precision of its vocabulary to advance concepts, and its key details, arguments, and inferential meaning” (p. 179). Close reading stresses engaging with a text of sufficient complexity directly to examine and analyze meaning thoroughly and methodically, encouraging students to read and reread deliberately (Beers & Probst, 2012; Fisher, 2010; Fisher & Frey, 2011; Pearson & Johnson, 1978).

Choosing an appropriately challenging text is critical for maximizing this approach. Directing student attention to the text, concepts covered, and issues uncovered empowers students to understand the central ideas and key supporting details. It also enables students to reflect on the meanings of individual words as well as overriding author messages. As teachers, our practices help to model for students what it means to be a dynamic and transactional reader (Beers & Probst, 2012).

Lapp, Grant, Moss, and Johnson (2013) make the connection between close reading and revisiting the text. They cite Cummins’ statement of readers, “They return to the text at the word, phrase, sentence, and paragraph levels to fully comprehend how the ‘important details fit together to support the author’s central idea(s)’” (2012, p. 8). Frequently, teachers have not emphasized the importance of rereading and its potential for helping to give students a deeper meaning. Students, then, may view rereading as a weakness or something only delayed or struggling readers engage in. Changing this perception is an important piece of espousing close reading.

## HOW TO LEAD DEVELOPING READERS THROUGH A CLOSE READING

Building the foundation for close reading involves instructional strategies and a process with which students can improve their critical reading skills. An instructional framework for multiple readings might look like the following:

**Phase One:** The first phase involves preparing students for close reading. Guide students to think about what they are reading by using strong questioning techniques. Elicit student background knowledge about the topic. Help students extend their thinking about related topics and evolutions of thought. This might easily be done through the use of post-its or notecards on which students write down or illustrate their initial thoughts. This process of making simple annotations begins to build the foundation for students to interact with the text on various levels. Some of these levels help readers better understand the decisions made by the author, such as why the author chose a particular word to describe or convey a point, chose a particular theme, or chose a specific sentence structure.

Students might make annotations about what they are reading according to guiding questions put forth by the teacher. Discussion might follow and students could be charged with coming away from the discussion with one new piece of information. Making sure that questions are of the higher level (analysis, synthesis, evaluation, creating new understandings) is imperative in this part of the process.

Powerful questions lay the foundation for guiding students to additional realms of understanding. Even young readers have the capacity to ask questions of the author, to determine different purposes for reading, and to locate phrases that might signal to the reader that further exploration should be conducted. Questions for consideration include:

- Why did the author write this piece?
- What question might you ask the author?
- Who do you think would really enjoy this particular selection?
  - The author plays with words like \_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. How do these words make you feel? What do they make you think of?
  - What might the author tell you about this story if he or she were right here beside you?
  - Direct students to identify who is telling the story. Is it a narrator or one of the characters in the story?
  - Who is the person telling the story? Can you think of some words to describe or characterize the character telling the story? Do these words help you to understand the main character's point of view?
  - What emotions do you feel as you are reading the story?
  - Can you tell what the story was about? What are the key points, details, and events that happened in the story?
  - Identify the tone of the reading. Is it negative or positive? Is it happy or sad? Is there a change in tone to be found from the beginning to the end of the story?

Some of these supports can be removed as students become more proficient at the skill of close reading.

**Phase Two:** The second phase involves similar activities, but the activities require students to think more critically about the text. For example, the teacher might prompt students to look for words that may take on a different meaning or symbolize something else. For example, an “odd duck” may refer to a person who has a unique personality or characteristics.

This phase, especially, requires strong modeling on the part of the teacher. Some of the strategies used by the teacher in this phase might involve think-alouds, reciprocal questioning, and turn-and-talk (Allington & Cunningham, 2007). Annotating at a deeper level and guided discussions that require students to think deeper will help expand students' understanding of a topic. The use of graphic organizers to arrange the information students have gained and what they would like to learn more about may be helpful. Included is an example of one student's work in this area (Figure 1).

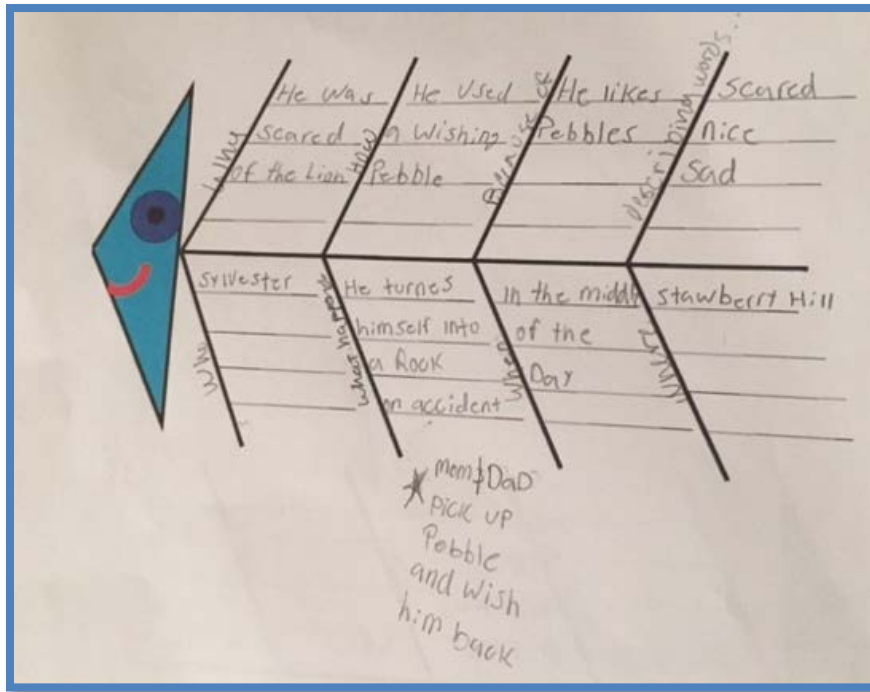


Figure 1. This figure, a fishbone graphic organizer, illustrates a student's response to *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*, by William Steig.

**Phase Three:** The next phase involves transitioning the activities in the previous phases to content writing. In this space, students are required to write with a purpose. This shift to the writing mode is important due to the emphasis that is placed on students' development in composing evidence-based argumentation and explanation as dominant modes of writing.

The practices outlined in the three phases are described to scaffold learning and facilitate successful reading through a closer look at the text. Students who can look closer, delve deeper, and think more critically about text are equipped with the tools to more readily function within the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). As Moore, Moore, Cunningham, and Cunningham (2011) write, "Literacy improves in situations with appropriate challenges, ones that strengthen students' abilities. Such levels of challenge allow students the pleasure of exerting themselves and experiencing success" (p. 31).

Close reading can be performed within the context of shared readings, read-alouds by the teacher, literature discussion groups, and guided reading groups. Utilizing good judgment about the types of texts that we choose for close reading is one of the most important components. Not all text warrants the kind of careful introspective stance we devote to pieces in close reading. That being

said, a well done wordless text that elicits strong emotions can be just as powerful or have as much potential for use in a close reading activity as a piece that touches upon strong topics such as justice, freedom, slavery, or diversity in a non-fiction format. Fisher and Frey write, “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).” (2012, p. 180).

## TECHNOLOGY CONNECTIONS

The evolving learners of today are digitally connected. Schools and classrooms have acquired many digital learning tools such as laptops, tablets, and e-readers. Students use digital resources and now, more than ever before, much of their learning may take place online. Technology is engaging and motivates students in the learning process, but its use does not come without some concerns. Some research indicates readers struggle with comprehension and the recall of information when reading digital content (Mangen, Walgermo, & Brennick, 2013). Some readers may discard learned reading strategies in favor of skimming text, and often digital content can be distracting to students, particularly for those students considered developing or struggling readers. Still, other researchers suggest that the type of text (digital, print) has no effect on reading comprehension (Margolin, Driscoll, Toland, & Kegler, 2013). Because the impact of print versus digital text is still under study, the authors suggest that teachers identify technologies that can be integrated into their curriculum that enable teachers to incorporate strategies and activities that specifically support readers’ efforts to read closely. Effective technologies provide readers with learning opportunities that help them read text more critically and think more deeply about their reading. These technologies enable teachers to embed multimedia, interactive activities, and questions and activities that promote higher order thinking and guide readers to take a closer look when reading the content of their texts.

## TOOLS AND PLATFORMS

In a review of studies involving student use of technologies to support reading comprehension, findings suggested that multimedia elements may be useful in supporting and motivating literacy development (Biancarosa & Griffiths, 2012; Guernsey, 2011; Roskos & Brueck, 2009; Sherman, Kleiman, & Peterson, 2004; Verhallen, Bus, & de Jong, 2006; Zucker, Moody, & McKenna, 2009). Multimodal learning opportunities address students’ learning styles and provide accommodations for equity of access. Students who are attempting to read difficult texts more closely may benefit from technologies and platforms that support their diverse reading levels, abilities, and special needs during their close reading activities. There are many websites and applications that can support readers’ comprehension of text by helping them to make connections, extract key concepts, understand the main idea of a passage, draw on their own prior knowledge, and analyze the author’s meaning. Despite concerns of using technology during reading, there are several platforms that may support teachers in developing close reading activities and help students to better comprehend, recall, and analyze information. The following technologies can be used effectively in teaching and learning for the purpose of curating resources and developing questions and activities that help teachers promote close reading.

### *CREATING DIGITAL CONTENT*

*Glogster* is an interactive tool that enables teachers to design close reading activities across the curriculum. Within this application, teachers can post short passages from readings with embedded images, graphics, audio, and videos relative to the subject that will engage students and help them comprehend the text by reading more closely. These added resources can help to build background

for understanding texts, provide additional on or below grade level readings for differentiated instruction, and provide visuals such as graphic charts, infographics, visual definitions or explanations, and virtual tours. Students using a *Glogster* designed for close reading will answer questions and respond to prompts from the teacher, and show their analysis of a reading with resources to support their arguments. This application enables students to experience multimedia and improve their digital literacy as they share their knowledge and understanding after performing close reading activities (See Figure 2).

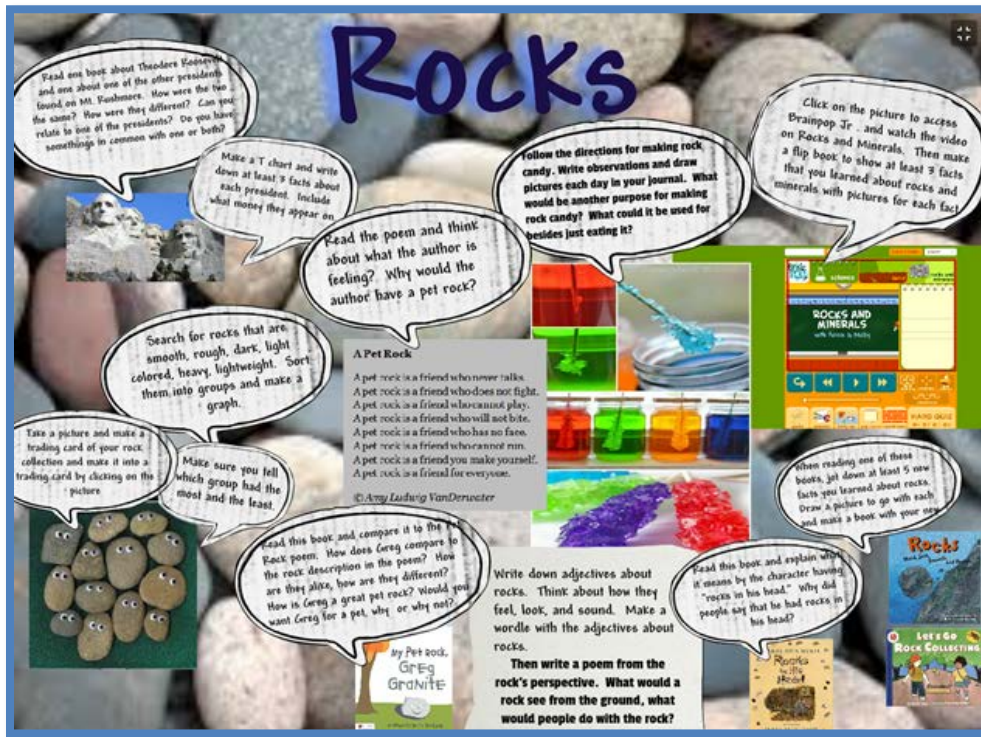


Figure 2: Glogster. This figure is an example of close reading activities using Glogster.

*VoiceThread* is a platform that promotes collaborative and focused discussions of a particular topic. Teachers can post images, videos, and/or documents for students to view and analyze. Teachers can then solicit close reading responses of the images, videos, and documents they have posted. Communication is via video, voice, or text, based on student preferences. Images and documents can be drawn on to help support explanations or instructions with an authentic audience. Using a simple PDF or Word document enables teachers to save poems, paragraphs, or short passages to which they can add comments or questions to guide students in close reading activities where they think critically about and analyze what they have read. This is an effective way of teaching students to take notes about their readings so they may then summarize what they have read.

### READING IN DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS

Several studies conducted by the Pew Research Center show that reading e-books continues to grow (Rainie, Zickuhr, Purcell, Madden, & Brenner, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2013; Zickuhr & Rainie, 2014). The number of people reading e-books quadrupled in less than two years (Rainie, Zickuhr, Purcell, Madden, & Brenner, 2012); forty-three percent of teens 16 and older own an

eReader or a tablet (Rainie & Smith, 2013); more teens are reading (Pew Research Center, 2013), and device owners read more often. Print books remain the dominant choice, but the number of teens who read e-books has nearly doubled in the past three years (Zickuhr, & Rainie, 2014), particularly for readers in their late teens and early twenties. These statistics have implications for developing readers as more digital learning permeates classrooms. The findings from School Library Journal's (SLJ) School Technology Survey (Kenney, 2011) indicate elementary school librarians' *will* (28 percent) or *may* (43 percent) purchase eBooks within the next two years. SLJR's School Technology Survey conducted in 2013 shows 68% of schools offer eBooks, up from 47% in 2012 and 36% in 2011.

Research shows students comprehend better when reading print versus digital text (Schugar, Smith, & Schugar, 2013). Many students enjoy and even prefer to read using electronic devices, not to mention that student reading of digital text will continue to increase parallel to the increase of technologies in schools. According to Burnett (2010), "Current educational practices are becoming increasingly anachronistic within a world in which knowledge, learning, and relationships are being re-defined in digital environments" (p. 13). Because of the anticipated continued growth of students reading digital text it is important not only to build a strong foundation of close reading strategies at an early age but also to teach children how to transfer those strategies so that they may read both print and digital text proficiently.

Reading text on electronic devices enables readers to take advantage of a variety of tools that can support students in close reading. Readers have access to an embedded glossary to help them define unfamiliar words. Many devices provide tracking of text to highlight words as students are reading. Readers can highlight individual words, phrases, or larger parts of the text they want to discuss with the teacher. They can also post virtual sticky notes with annotations, questions, or comments about what they read. Teachers can use highlighting and note-taking features to embed thought-provoking comments and questions throughout any text used for shared readings. Small groups or the entire class of students can access the same teacher notes. These questions and comments enable teachers to set a purpose for reading and rereading, provide examples of modeling and thinking-aloud, or help to clarify parts of the text that may be confusing and need further clarification. Findings from the teaching of a literature unit showed students used more text evidence in their arguments, and they doubled the average amount of quotes from the literature being analyzed, due to the ease of bookmarking (Haveman, 2014).

Newer digital platforms, such as *Curriculet*, enable teachers to add questions, offer support, embed media at critical points in the text, and assess understanding through quizzes (Herold, 2014). All these features can heighten student engagement, foster critical thinking, and lead to rich discussion about the text with others, which is important in close readings (Fisher & Frey, 2012). Care should be taken to ensure activities are focused and supportive of deeper reading, and not a distraction from it (Herold, 2014).

Using *Actively Learn*, teachers can select content from various grade levels and across the content areas or from the library by grade levels and genre. Teachers can create assignments using supplemental material that can be added by teachers and shared both school- and district-wide. Online text can be added via the URL from the Internet, a pdf, or a Google document. Teachers can set a purpose for reading and rereading, embed stop-and-think questions, write notes, embed links and definitions, and design close reading activities for whole class participation, small groups, or individualized differentiated instruction. Students can highlight, take notes, listen to the text, access

definitions, or alert teachers they need clarification. This platform supports collaborative discussions while obtaining perspectives from the entire group.

*Learning A-Z* provides resources for students in PreK through 6th grade. Students can access leveled eBooks with short leveled readings that contain close reading activities. Students can view words and phrases being highlighted while listening to books being read to them. Students can record their own reading and listen to their recordings to build their reading fluency. Tools enable students to draw, highlight, type text, and use stamps such as questions marks, stars and checkmarks. Teachers can assess learning via assessment data and running records of student reading. Resources are aligned to state and Common Core standards.

### *PROGRESS MONITORING SOFTWARE*

Programs designed specifically for monitoring students' reading progress, such as Renaissance Learning's Accelerated Reader 360 and Scholastic's READ 180, engage students with personalized practice activities in self-selected books specific to each student's interests, reading level, and academic needs. Within these types of programs, students are able to build background knowledge, highlight text, view high-interest videos that support the text, and respond to writing prompts to show their learning (Allington & Cunningham, 2007; Cossett, 2012). All of these are strategies that support students in reading text more closely. Data collection informs teachers and helps them in strategic planning for advancing students to higher reading levels.

### COLLABORATION WITH AUTHENTIC AUDIENCES

*Skype* and *Zoom* are two platforms that could be used to build global connections with authentic audiences. Students could hold discussions with their peers within their classroom, their school, and other schools worldwide. This would enable students to hear others' perspectives about a topic on which they are reading, build support and reasoning for their arguments, or share what they have learned from their close reading activities. Students can also connect with authors and illustrators of their favorite children's books. Award-winning author, Kate Messner (2009), published a list of authors and illustrators who will provide free Skype sessions. A few of the award-winning authors and illustrators who do virtual presentations include Leslie Boulion, Jill Esbaum, Kirby Larson, Debbie Ridpath Ohi, Amy Sklansky, Melissa Stewart, and Suzanne Williams. Students connecting with authors can get answers to questions that help them gain more insight into and better understand the books they've read.

### CONCLUSION

Close reading has the potential to issue an invitation to students to more carefully partake of a text, to, in the words of Adler and Van Doren (1972), "x-ray the book...(for) the skeleton hidden between the covers" (p. 75). It holds the promise of helping us to convey to students the message that there are certain habits of mind that take place when reading deeply and closely. It also has the potential to build stamina and persistence, even when confronted with texts that aren't easily consumed (Fisher & Frey, 2012).



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