

# *More Than Just Glitter: Using Text-Dependent Questions as Part of Foundational Literacy Practice*

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## **Abstract**

*New strategies come along all the time, but these strategies matter little if educators are not sure why they are using them or what the desired outcome is. Quality literacy instruction should be rooted in effective foundational practices. Text-dependent questions offer a foundation for literacy practices that support students' comprehension, understanding, and discussion of complex texts. These questions can be asked at different cognitive levels – literal, structural, and inferential. Strategic use of these text-dependent questions can also be used to scaffold student deeper reading and inference making. The questions can also be integrated into a variety of literacy activities and help ensure that the text remains central to the after-reading literacy activities. These activities can be used throughout a literacy curriculum.*

**Keywords:** *text-dependent questions, anticipation guides, opinion stations, curriculum*

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It seems like there is always a new product, an app, a new fancy strategy. Sometimes I feel like we want all the glitter but are missing the substance that makes for quality literacy instruction. We want a new strategy, a new gimmick, something flashy, but what we really need is good, foundational, literacy instruction. We need to go back to the basics and build up. We need to remember why we use certain practices or specific strategies. A practice or strategy is only meaningful if we know why we are using it and what we want to get out of it. If we want students to comprehend, understand, and engage deeply with complex texts, we need to use foundational practices that help our students do just that. One of the practices that can help create a solid foundation of literacy

instruction that engages students in both elementary and secondary classrooms is the use of text-dependent questions. Text-dependent questions can be used across different literacy assignments, but in every instance they serve to focus student attention on the text and allow for active discussion of complex texts. Educators can build on text-dependent questions to enhance student understanding, incorporate more student talk, and support student question generation.

## **A Primer on Text-Dependent Questions**

Text-dependent questions at the basic level are questions that require students to cite text evidence with their answer. The focus on the

centrality of text is not new, but it has evolved since the pre-1965 “text-centric era” (Pearson & Cervetti, 2015). The creation of the Common Core standards helped lead to this re-emergence but with reader and context playing a more important role than in the early 1900s version.

Text-dependent questions differ from more reader-centric questions often posed by teachers that ask students to rely almost solely on background knowledge or personal feelings for connection. For example, a teacher may ask students “What would you do if this happened to you?” or something similar. While it has its own merits, this question does not require the student to wrestle with the text or refer to it. Beyond relying on the text, text-dependent questions are created at different levels. While there are a number of different ways to look at these levels, I use the hierarchy developed by Frey and Fisher (2013). These levels, described in Table 1, are literal, structural, inferential, and action-oriented (or after reading) questions.

Literal level questions deal with key details and general understandings. Despite the fact that information can clearly be found in the text, the questions still require text evidence. For example, a teacher may pose the question: where are the characters located in the beginning of the story? This is a skill that teachers should model for students and use gradual release of responsibility to support students’ effective identification of text evidence. Structural level questions deal with vocabulary and text structure. For example, why did the author use dialogue during the initial scene? These questions focus the students on the author’s craft and heighten their “reading like a writer” awareness.

The next level is inferential questions – the level at which students most often struggle. These

questions deal with more than just what we think of as inferential questions. They also deal with author’s purpose questions (another common struggle spot), and intertextual connections (where students make connections between two or more texts). For example, what do this story and the article we read last week say about the value (or not) of human life?

The final level of questioning, action-oriented, is what I might describe as the after-reading activity. This could be a writing prompt, debate, presentation, etc. The key is that the students must refer back to the text to support their work. For example, what does this story say about people’s treatment of other people? How can you relate this to today’s society? Initially, teachers can model how to approach answering text-dependent questions by using annotation.

Teachers can do a read-aloud of a short piece of text and practice answering the questions. It is important here that teachers use “I” statements to make their thinking and process transparent to the class. Examples of “I” statements include: When I read this question about the use of the word “mad,” I first find it in the text. Then I re-read the paragraph and think about how the word relates to the context. When I am making an inference, I find the place in the text that relates to the question. Then I relate this to what I already know or what I have read before.

Instruction can start with the modeling of answering literal level questions and then moving up to both structural and inferential questions. This will help students understand both the purpose and the process of identifying relevant and accurate text evidence to support their answers to these types of questions.

**Table 1**

***Types of Text-Dependent Questions***

Question Type	Description
Literal	What does the text say? Includes general understand and key details
Structural	How does the text work? Includes word choice and author’s craft
Inferential	Includes author’s purpose and intertextual connections
Action-oriented/after-reading	Include activities such as debates, investigations, writing, and Socratic seminars that tie back to the complex text

**Strategic Use of Text-Dependent Questions**

Text-dependent questions are more powerful when they are used together than in isolation. As Frey and Fisher (2013) assert in their book *Rigorous Reading*, “The types of questions students are asked influence how they read a text” (p. 51). Strategic use of these questions can be used to scaffold student thinking and support students’ answering of inferential questions. For example, teachers can purposefully create and ask literal and structural level questions that draw students’ attention to parts of the text that will assist them in answering inferential questions. This use of text-dependent questions could be in a close reading protocol, a strategy that has been around since the beginning of the last century (Frey & Fisher, 2013). A close

reading protocol consists of having students read a section of text together in small groups. The teacher starts with a broad, literal level question, and then sends the students back to the text using a structural and then inferential level question. Note: While the intent may be to have students re-read at least parts of the text three times, it is not recommended that you tell the students they will be reading the selection three times. Instead, just pose the questions. Students will need to strategically re-read to answer the questions.

Here is a concrete example using an excerpt from “The Most Dangerous Game” (Connell, 2017).

**Figure 1**

*Excerpt from "The Most Dangerous Game" (1924) by Richard Connell*

"OFF THERE to the right--somewhere--is a large island," said Whitney. "It's rather a mystery--" "What island is it?" Rainsford asked.

"The old charts call it 'Ship-Trap Island,'" Whitney replied. "A suggestive name, isn't it? Sailors have a curious dread of the place. I don't know why. Some superstition--"

"Can't see it," remarked Rainsford, trying to peer through the dank tropical night that was palpable as it pressed its thick warm blackness in upon the yacht.

"You've good eyes," said Whitney, with a laugh, "and I've seen you pick off a moose moving in the brown fall bush at four hundred yards, but even you can't see four miles or so through a moonless Caribbean night."

"Nor four yards," admitted Rainsford. "Ugh! It's like moist black velvet."

"It will be light enough in Rio," promised Whitney. "We should make it in a few days. I hope the jaguar guns have come from Purdey's. We should have some good hunting up the Amazon. Great sport, hunting."

"The best sport in the world," agreed Rainsford.

"For the hunter," amended Whitney. "Not for the jaguar."

"Don't talk rot, Whitney," said Rainsford. "You're a big-game hunter, not a philosopher. Who cares how a jaguar feels?"

"Perhaps the jaguar does," observed Whitney.

"Bah! They've no understanding."

"Even so, I rather think they understand one thing--fear. The fear of pain and the fear of death."

"Nonsense," laughed Rainsford. "This hot weather is making you soft, Whitney. Be a realist. The world is made up of two classes--the hunters and the huntees. Luckily, you and I are hunters. Do you think we've passed that island yet?"

Each question builds on the others and supports students’ deeper understanding of the text. The very act of questioning is being used as a scaffold for student thinking.

**Anticipation Guides**

Close reading is not the only strategy that can be used to incorporate text-dependent thinking. Educators can also integrate text-dependent thinking into the use of anticipation guides (Fisher et al., 2017). Anticipation guides are a set of ideas, statements, or themes that, in addition to piquing student interest, help to activate students’ prior knowledge about what they are reading. Teachers can identify themes that students track throughout their reading.

Students decide whether they agree or disagree with the teacher-provided statements and then find text evidence as they read with those in mind. Students revisit their opinions after they have finished the text. As part of this activity, educators can pose text-dependent questions throughout. In addition, they can have students develop their own text-dependent questions to show their understanding. These student-generated questions can focus on the text evidence they find to support the themes or statements provided by the teacher, or they can point to themes the students identify on their own. Educators can wrap up with inferential questions or text-dependent after-reading activities.

**Table 2.**

*Example of an Anticipation Guide*

<b>Theme/Index</b>	<b>Agree/Disagree</b>	<b>Why?</b>	<b>Evidence Collected</b>	<b>After Reading Agree/Disagree</b>
The world is made up of two classes--the hunters and the huntees.				
It is never acceptable to take a human life.				
To be civilized is to rid the world of those you believe are bad people.				

The anticipation guide activates students’ prior knowledge and provides students purpose in their reading. This also helps them focus on certain pieces of text evidence.

**Literacy Assignment Analysis Framework**

Using text-dependent questions can also help ensure that the activities we assign are quality

assignments. They can help ensure projects or essays meet the demands of the literacy assignment analysis framework. This framework, developed by the Education Trust (Dabrowski, 2016), was designed to help guide teachers in creating assignments to push students to higher levels of literacy learning. It outlines that quality literacy assignments contain the

following: alignment with the standards (they identify the standards as Common Core, but the framework can easily work with the TEKS or any set of rigorous standards), centrality of the text, cognitive challenge, and motivation and engagement. Using text-dependent questions can help ensure that the text is always central to an assignment. The level of questioning can ensure that the assignment is cognitively challenging.

The report also includes the use of discussion and teacher scaffolding. These additions make the use of text-dependent questions even more relevant. Text-dependent questions in protocols such as close reading or reciprocal teaching can aid student discussion. The strategic use of text-dependent questions can also be part of the scaffolding needed for quality literacy instruction.

### **Opinion Stations**

One activity that can be used after reading is opinion stations. The teacher poses a question to the students that they write about for fifteen minutes. Students must decide if they agree, strongly agree, disagree, or strongly disagree.

An example of an opinion station prompt is to look at the following statement and decide whether you agree, disagree, strongly agree, or strongly disagree with this statement: *Rainsford is deeply changed and no longer believes hunting is a respectable pastime. Make sure to support your opinion with evidence from the text. You have 15 minutes.* This writing will serve as the basis for a paper students will later complete.

After the initial writing, students move into groups of like-minded peers to find evidence that will support their positions. For example, students who agree with the statement will find evidence to support that stance. After the small groups work to identify text evidence, they post the evidence on chart paper and share with the whole group. Students listen to the evidence and can change their mind about whether or not they agree, strongly agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. The students then return to their

original prompt. First, they write about whether or not they changed their mind and why they did or did not alter their opinion. After that, the students address the original prompt, identifying their opinion, and then supporting it with the evidence discussed during the activity.

### **Teaching Students to Write Their Own Questions**

Once students have become familiar with text-dependent questions, they can begin writing their own questions. One way to incorporate student writing of text-dependent questions is through the practice of reciprocal teaching (Fisher et al., 2017). In reciprocal teaching, students read a text in groups of four. The educator will have chunked the selection with pre-designated places in the text to stop and discuss. For each section, one student makes predictions, one poses questions, one seeks areas that need clarification, and one summarizes the section. For the question section, the educator can suggest, encourage, or require students to pose text-dependent questions. Once students have a general handle on this, teachers can begin encouraging students to ask specific levels of text-dependent questions. For example, students may start writing literal level questions but may then be challenged and supported to write structural or inferential questions.

### **Conclusion**

Text-dependent questions are a solid foundational practice – not just a glittery or passing fad. These can be integrated into many literacy activities. Teachers can pose the questions themselves or teach students to write them on their own. However these questions are used, they are a foundational literacy practice that promotes close reading and active interaction with a text. At the core, they help students dig deeper into the complex texts that students come across in classrooms and beyond. They also help students learn to generate a rich mix of questions every time they read. This method will lay a strong literacy foundation for future learning.

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