As we have continued to develop and implement close reading lessons, several distinct aspects of this instructional routine have emerged. We have come to see close reading as a form of guided instruction in which the teacher questions, prompts, and cues the learner. It’s part of the gradual release of responsibility, not a comprehensive literacy instructional effort.

To demonstrate what we mean, we’ll be referring to two excerpted texts set out the accompanying sidebar dealing with the historical figure Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce.

Text Selection
Close reading begins with the selection of an appropriate text. First and foremost, the text needs to be complex and worthy of this level of attention. As 11th grade English teacher Marisol Thayre says, “You don’t need to closely read Seventeen magazine. It should be hard.” In other words, the quantitative level of text complexity should ensure that students are provided an opportunity to struggle with the text. We’re not suggesting that first graders read War and Peace, but rather that the selected text requires repeated readings and deep discussions to ensure understanding.

In addition to the quantitative factors, the selected text should be analyzed qualitatively to determine the areas that contribute to the complexity. Quantitative measures of text tell us that a text is complex; qualitative elements tell us why the text is complex. For example, when Oscar Corrigan analyzed Chief Joseph’s speech “I Will Fight No More Forever,” he identified density, language conventions and clarity, prior knowledge, and cultural knowledge as contributors to the complexity understanding that these could become teaching points for his students.

Develop and Practice Student Habits
Close reading requires that students re-read the selected text a number of times. Subsequent readings of the text allow students to dig deeper into the meaning of the text, comparing the text with other texts and what they know or think.

Close reading also assumes that students know how to annotate a text so that they can incorporate evidence from the text into their discussions and subsequent writing tasks. These habits, such as underlining key ideas, circling words and phrases that are confusing, and writing questions or reactions in the margins, need to be developed at the beginning of the year and used regularly. Although important, these procedures are simply that: procedures. They are not the keys to close reading. There is more to close reading than underlining key ideas and reading a text more than once.

The Keys to Close Reading
There are three keys to close reading, the first of which focuses on the questions that students explore as part of their reading. These text-dependent questions should invite students back into the text as they look for evidence or consider something new. The risk is that text-dependent questions will focus exclusively on details, recall, and right there information. That’s far too limiting for a high quality close reading.

The text-dependent questions should allow teachers to explore all of the Common Core State Standards, including vocabulary, text structure, author’s purpose, and cross-text analysis, not just the key details. In addition, the text-dependent questions should be kept in the teacher’s metaphorical back pocket, only to be brought out when the conversation falters, or when students are ready for a deeper dive into the text.

The second key to close reading relates to the discussions students should have with one another as they read, and re-read, the text. As noted in Speaking and Listening Standard 1, “Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively” (National Governor’s Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010, p. 22), students need to talk with others about their ideas.

Close readings provide students with opportunities to develop their collaborative conversation skills, integrating evidence from the text into their discussions. For example, while reading Chief Joseph’s speech, Marla said, “He wants to go find his kids. It says it right here: my children.” Paulina differed, saying “I disagree with you because he says ‘my people have run away,’ so I think that he sees all of them as his children, because he is their chief.” These collaborative conversations allow students to make a claim, provide evidence for their claims, and offer counter claims, all of which are important skills in college classrooms and a wide range of careers.
The third key to close reading involves the post-reading tasks. Unfortunately, too many after reading tasks can be completed based on personal experiences and not actual reading of a text. The range of post reading tasks is fairly wide, including debates, Socratic Seminars, and writing prompts. We are especially interested in the role that writing from sources plays in close reading. For example, using informational task template 12 from the Literacy Design Collaborative (www.literacydesigncollaborative.org), the teacher constructed the following writing prompt related to Chief Joseph’s speech:

What is the role of courage in surrender? After reading and discussing Chief Joseph’s speech “I Will Fight No More Forever,” write an essay that defines courage and explains the courageousness of Chief Joseph’s decision. Support your discussion with evidence from the text. What conclusions can you draw?

This closed the loop on the close reading students had completed. They used their annotations from the text, the information they gleaned from their collaborative conversations, and the feedback they received from their teacher as they constructed their responses. That’s the power of close reading.

Reference

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Framing Text Dependent Questions That Drive Close Reading Skills

As Tim Shanahan (2013) noted, early readings of a text focus on “What does the text say?” whereas later readings of the text focus on “How does the text work?” and even later in the process the questions focus on “What does the text mean?” Using these prompts, we have created this example of text dependent questions that can be used to drive students’ close reading of the following selections dealing with Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce.

I Will Fight No More Forever
by Chief Joseph

I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed. Looking Glass is dead. Toohulhulsote is dead. The old men are all dead. It is the young men who say no and yes. He who led the young men is dead.

It is cold and we have no blankets. The little children are freezing to death. My people, some of them, have run away to the hills and have no blankets, no food. No one knows where they are. Perhaps they are freezing to death.

I want to have time to look for my children and see how many of them I can find. Maybe I shall find them among the dead. Hear me, my chiefs, I am tired. My heart is sad and sick. From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever.

—1877

Before his death, Chief Joseph’s father said to his son:

My son, my body is returning to my mother earth, and my spirit is going very soon to see the Great Spirit Chief. When I am gone, think of your country. You are the chief of these people. They look to you to guide them. Always remember that your father never sold his country. You must stop your ears whenever you are asked to sign a treaty selling your home. A few years more and white men will be all around you. They have their eyes on this land. My son, never forget my dying words. This country holds your father’s body. Never sell the bones of your father and your mother.

Questions for students to focus on and respond to:

What does the text say?

• What happened?
• Who delivered this speech?
• Without yet knowing who Looking Glass and Toohulhulsote are, what can we say about their roles in this decision?
• What concerns does Chief Joseph have about the health and welfare of his people? How do you know?

How does the text work?

• What does Chief Joseph mean when he says, “From where the sun now stands?”
• What is the tone of this speech? What words and phrases support your claim?

• How does the structure convey Chief Joseph’s mood?
• What is it about the inclusion of the word forever in the last line, “I will fight no more forever” that makes this statement so memorable?

What does the text mean?

• Who is Chief Joseph referring to when he says, “I want to have time to look for my children”? What other parts of the speech support your claim?
• How does the second passage help you to understand the surrender speech? What inner conflict would Chief Joseph have experienced? Where do you see evidence of this conflict in the speech?
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