

# A Close Look at Close Reading



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**This article and its introductory activity are intended to foster discussion about steps educators can take to implement the use of close reading by their students for purposes of improving literacy skills and content learning, as well as meeting the Common Core State Standards.**

## *Activity:* How to Read this Article

Below is a close-reading activity that can be used with the text below this box. Feel free to modify any of the questions or tasks to address your specific needs.

1. Before reading...
  - a. Discuss the purpose for reading this article. For example – after collaboratively reading the article, readers will be able to identify three steps their school can take to create consistent practices around close reading.
  - b. Think, Write, and Discuss Activity: How is close reading being defined in your classroom or school? How do you think this will compare to what the article will share?
2. During reading...
  - a. First reading: Read the text and code it for phrases or sentences you find interesting (use an \*), surprising (use an !), or confusing (use a ?).
  - b. Second reading: Reread the text or parts of the text. Circle two or three words that capture key messages in the text.
  - c. Share and discuss your thoughts.
3. After reading
  - a. Discuss, or generate your own questions about, the following:
    - » Based on your reading, what are the implications for teachers and instructional practices around close reading in your school or district?
    - » Identify three or more actions that school and/or district leaders can take to support a consistent approach to close reading.

I recently observed a high school social studies teacher asking students to engage in the close reading of Charles Joseph Minard’s map of Napoleon’s march to Moscow.<sup>1</sup> At the end of the lesson, the teacher asked students to respond to what it felt like to read and analyze the map so closely. Although most of the students were very engaged in the task, many responded with some variation of the following comments.

- » Why do I have to read this?
- » Why can’t my teacher just tell me what I need to know?
- » This really made my brain hurt!

In my years working as a literacy specialist, I have found that many students, at all performance levels, pose questions or make comments like these when asked to closely read challenging texts.

Students are not the only ones who wonder about close reading. Many teachers who do not teach English Language Arts (ELA) have their own version of these questions and comments: They want to know why *they* are expected to help develop students’ reading skills when they are teaching history or science or some other non-ELA content area. And they wonder how they can be expected to teach close reading when they were never taught how to do it themselves. Their concerns have only increased with the advent of the Common Core State Standards. As identified in the work of EngageNY, one of the important shifts the new standards are asking all teachers to make is to “create more time and space and support in the curriculum for close reading” of challenging texts.<sup>2</sup> When teachers become aware of this expectation they have many questions. This article provides answers to some of these.

## Why do all teachers need to teach close reading?

The ability to read a complex text and to understand what is being stated or implied within it is a skill needed in all content areas, not just in English Language Arts. Every content area has complex material that students need to be able to analyze. Perhaps one of the most common misconceptions about close reading is that the term “text” refers only to printed words. Anything that contains complex information can be considered a challenging text. For example, all of the following could all be considered complex texts that students might need to read closely: charts, maps (like Minard’s), diagrams, word problems, tables, music (in all forms), artwork, photographs, bodies in motion (imagine trying to explain a football game to someone unfamiliar with the rules), natural phenomena (a fly fisherman reading the river and what is hatching in order to select flies), machines, plans for building a piece of furniture, etc. Given this broad view of what constitutes a complex text, virtually all teachers, irrespective of the subject they teach (e.g., physical education, shop, calculus) will find themselves needing to teach their students how to read closely. And given the importance of teaching students how to interpret complex information from a wide variety of “texts,” it is no surprise that the first Common Core anchor standards in reading for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and the Tech-

nical Subjects expect students to “read closely to determine what [a] text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it” (pp. 10 and 60). When teachers begin to think about these standards, they often wonder what close reading looks like for them, with their students, and with the complex texts they already use in their classrooms.

## What should close reading look like in my classroom?

Close reading is a strategic process a reader uses in dealing with a complex text to acquire the information needed to complete a task. There is no single correct way to read something closely. Some experts have argued that to closely read a complex text, students need to read it at least three times. Others argue that teachers should be asking students text-dependent questions. However, while many close-reading strategies are useful at one time or another, no single approach or specific set of strategies will be appropriate in every situation. More simply put, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to close reading. For example, Duke and Carlisle (2011, p. 211) write that “there is not a single path to comprehension development. This is largely because there are myriad reader factors, text factors, and context factors that all impact reading comprehension.” Instead, what they and other researchers suggest is that teachers carefully consider the text, context, and readers themselves to determine

<sup>1</sup> For more information see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles\\_Joseph\\_Minard](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Joseph_Minard)

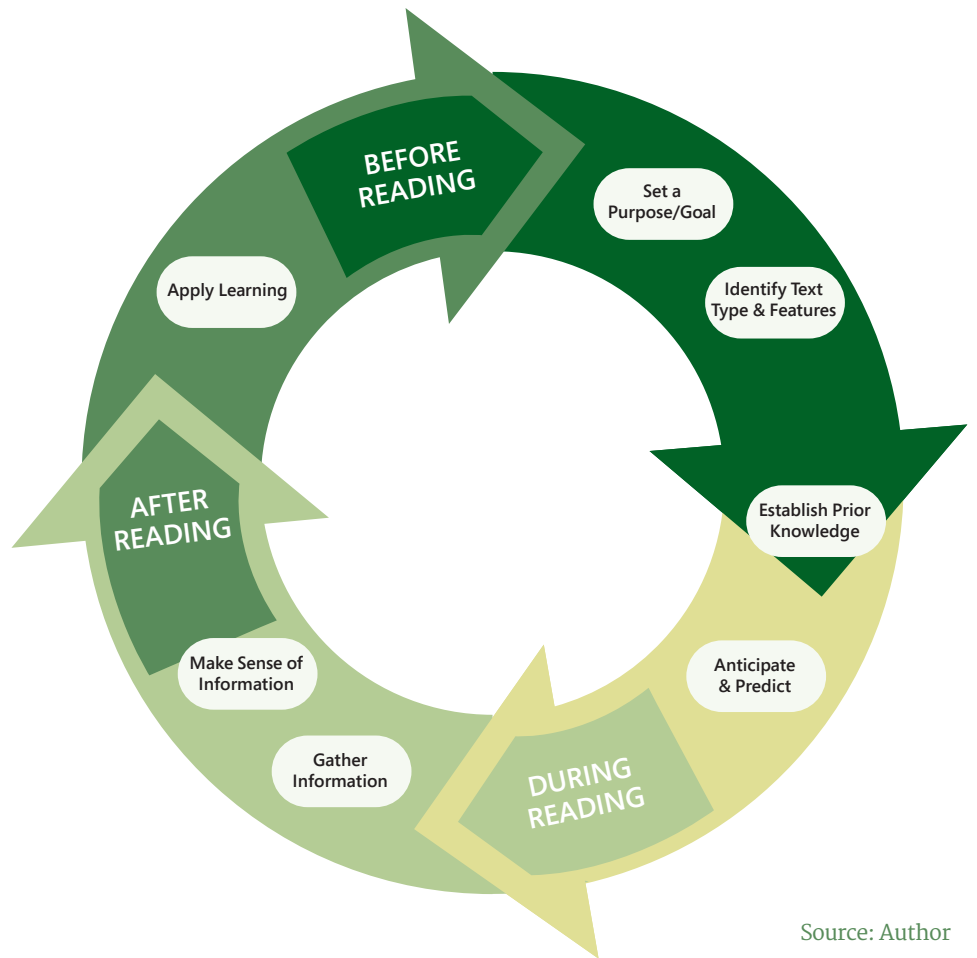
<sup>2</sup> From the EngageNY website found at <https://www.engageny.org/resource/common-core-shifts>

the appropriate collection and sequence of strategies for the close reading of challenging material. Thus, the best thing education leaders can do to support close reading is to provide teachers with a common and flexible framework to help them and students select and sequence the right combination of activities that will meet the specific needs and demands of any challenging text.

## How do we teach students to read closely?

The diagram to the right provides a common and flexible framework teachers can use to develop lessons that support the close reading of any complex text. The framework divides close reading into three phases: before reading, during reading, and after reading. While these three phases are already familiar to many teachers, the framework asks them to identify the kinds of thinking that students need to be doing in each phase of the process. The first phase focuses on how students will prepare to read closely. The second phase emphasizes how students will actively think about the information in the text. The third phase asks teachers to consider how students will apply what they have learned from their reading.

In addition to the framework, the questions below help teachers design and sequence effective activities for close reading of complex texts in content lessons. The questions can also be used to support conversations among teachers who are developing lessons collaboratively. One effective practice is to use the questions as a protocol in professional learning conversations or during common planning time.



Source: Author

### Before Reading

1. What is the student’s reason for reading and how will the objectives be communicated at the beginning of and throughout the lesson?
2. How will students identify or recognize visible and/or invisible features of the text(s) that relate to the purposes or objectives for reading (e.g., bolded terms, cause-and-effect relationships)?
3. What knowledge do students need to have before reading the text(s)? How will they gain it?
4. What might the students predict

or anticipate before reading? How will they do this?

### During Reading

5. How will students actually read (e.g., silently, in pairs, classroom read-aloud)?
6. How will students gather information or take notes (e.g., two-column notes, coding, graphic organizers, concept maps)?
7. How will students think deeply about the information they gathered (e.g., discussion, sorting, writing)?

## After Reading

8. How will students apply what they learned and what is novel about this task (i.e., what is the formative assessment)?

The close-reading diagram and guiding questions can be used with any of the many resources that provide “tool-boxes” of literacy strategies. There are many books and websites that, collectively, describe a wide array of strategies teachers can use to support close reading. A handful of these resources are listed below.

## References

Duke, N. K., & Carlisle, J. F. (2011). The development of comprehension. In M. L. Kamil, P. D. Pearson, E. B. Moje, & P. Afflerbach (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research, Vol. IV* (pp. 199–228). London: Routledge.

National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010). *Common Core State Standards for English language arts and literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects: Appendix A: Research supporting key elements of the standards and glossary of key terms*. Washington, DC: Authors. Retrieved from [www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix\\_A.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_A.pdf)

## Additional Resources

### More information about the Close Reading Framework

For additional information about the close-reading framework described above, including a more detailed description of each phase of close reading, descriptions of lessons in various content areas, and other planning tools, feel free to contact the author.

### Tools and Resources for Analyzing Complex Texts

- » Achieve the Core’s Text Complexity Collection – <http://achievethecore.org/page/642/text-complexity-collection>
- » The CCSSO Text Complexity Resources – [http://www.ccsso.org/Navigating\\_Text\\_Complexity.html](http://www.ccsso.org/Navigating_Text_Complexity.html)

### Online Resources with Common Core Friendly Literacy Strategies

- » 10 Visual Literacy Strategies – <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/ccia-10-visual-literacy-strategies-todd-finley>
- » Literacy and Learning Website – <http://www.litandlearn.lpb.org/strategies.html>
- » Learning Points – <http://www.learningpt.org/literacy/adolescent/strategies.php>

### Books

Adkins, E., & Burnett, A. (2013). *20 literacy strategies to meet the Common Core: Increasing rigor in middle & high school classrooms*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

Barton, M., & Heidema, C. (2002). *Teaching reading in mathematics: A supplement to Teaching Reading in the Content Areas Teacher’s Manual (2nd ed.)*. Aurora, CO: Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL).

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Billmeyer, R., & Barton, M. (1998). *Teaching reading in the content areas: If not me, then who?: Teacher’s manual (2nd ed.)*. Aurora, CO: McREL.

Buehl, D. (2014). *Classroom strategies for interactive learning (4th ed.)*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Cummins, S. (2013). *Close reading of informational texts: Assessment-driven instruction in grades 3–8*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Schoenbach, R. (2012). *Reading for understanding: A guide to improving reading in middle and high school classrooms (2nd ed.)*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Spencer, J. (2103). *Ten differentiation strategies for building Common Core literacy*. Westerville, OH: Association for Middle Level Education.

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