

Chapter 1: *Close Reading, A Love Story*

In this chapter, I found it very valuable to review the history of the concept of “close reading” and how it has evolved. I think it is important to acknowledge the importance of the reader and a desire to inspire students to want to actively engage in and discuss the text. Perhaps my favorite line is “our connection to the written word can be as deep as a love affair” because love is what draws us to want to know the details intimately.

With the adoption of the Common Core State Standards we have seen a resurrection of the concept of close reading. This book steps in and offers a way to define and implement close reading to support teaching the standards while honoring the critical need for student engagement. Most importantly, close reading is a strategy we want students to be able to “do” rather than a task or a drill. Ideally, we want students to be able to apply this skill to any type of reading but would never ask them to do it for everything they read.

The author’s criteria for close reading instruction make it clear that the power is in

- raising student engagement,
- developing independence,
- making it part, but not all of your reading instruction
- providing students extended time to read
- repeated practice of the strategy
- designed to meet the needs and skill level of your students

This clear articulation of close reading as part of a balanced literacy program and highlighting the importance of student engagement and joy is important in a time where the interpretation of the standards by many often fails to keep students at the center of focus. It’s so important for us to foster the lifelong love of reading in our students and avoid teaching strategies in isolation.

This chapter also does a nice job of explaining how the book is organized, with an emphasis on the intent to support instruction for all students, from basic to more complex lessons. The concept of establishing a ritual of close reading in the classroom by teaching the lenses as tools to students is an approach that is both manageable and sustainable for both teachers and students. I look forward to digging deeper into each chapter and being able to apply these strategies in my real classroom using the real work we do each day.

Chapter 2: The Essence of Understanding: A Study of Text Evidence

As this chapter begins, it reminds us that when students read a text they are really starting a relationship with the author and that close reading offers the reader an opportunity to focus in and pay attention to the author's message. Furthermore, the idea that students need to be given the language or terminology to talk about text in a more meaningful way really resonated with me. Often we send students off to find a main idea and details without stopping to consider the need for more precise language that would lead to richer discoveries and conversations. This need for common language as we scaffold students through their reading development during their elementary years is so important as it develops independence and empowerment in students. Just as we ask students to be more precise in their details when they write, we want them to zoom in on details in their reading as well.

Figure 2.2 is a great visual for an anchor chart with the steps for reading closely across several skill areas. Repeating the 3 steps across all the different skill areas helps to establish the routine or ritual with students.

1. Read through lenses
2. Use the lenses to find patterns
3. Use patterns to develop a new understanding of the text

Even better is the chart in the appendix that puts fiction and non-fiction side-by-side. I think it is helpful for students to be able to compare how this strategy works with both types of text.

The author suggests we first start with texts that we are familiar with. This can be so powerful when students realize that what they thought they already knew was incomplete or perhaps could change if they took a much closer look. Song lyrics in particular is a great idea, because we often mindlessly sing along without giving much thought to the deeper meaning or message we could find if we studied them as a piece of writing.

As a lover of read aloud, I believe that I would try this first with my students using our class read aloud. It would be a great way to model, and then scaffold the strategy by using a text everyone is familiar with and having students engage in writing and talking about. Choosing to focus on 1 lens as students are learning is so important for my 4th graders. Working in the group, we can co-construct our list and work together to see the patterns. Many of my students are successful at identifying key details about characters, but don't slow down or reflect on how those details may weave together to form a pattern. Other students do this without being aware of their own metacognition. The final step of reflecting on how their thinking has changed is critical in helping students value the process. If they can see how a close look reveals a more powerful or different understanding of the text, then they may be more compelled to pursue the strategy. After all, why would I do it if it didn't change anything? The use of gradual release of responsibility is consistent with the way I always teach new strategies so teaching it through read aloud and in book groups would come before having students try it on their own.

The section on reading for text evidence in non-fiction text is helpful in many ways. As my students read for information or for a research project, I often see them pulling details without regard for whether they understand them or not. Sometimes it's a vocabulary challenge, but it can also be a complex idea about a process. Using the lens, pattern, reflect strategy would help them to understand their topic more deeply rather than just finding facts. I think it would help them to synthesize their ideas.

I was really inspired by the idea of using the lenses to look more closely at our lives. I believe for my students this would be where I would start. So even before I introduce the strategy for "close reading" of text, I think we will take some time to "close read" details in our lives, our school, and our classroom. This feels more playful and "fun". I imagine having students take photos of their rooms, our school, and our style and using that documentation to study details.

Chapter 3: A Way with Words: A Study of Word Choice.

As mentioned in this chapter, I love sharing with students the idea that word choice is purposeful and powerful. I like my students to stop and think about how the author specifically chose their words and phrases to communicate their message. We discuss the importance of paying attention to powerful words and phrases and taking the time to reflect on them rather than skipping past the unfamiliar ones. For my 4th graders, developing an awareness of the intentionality of an author's craft and then be able to discuss it in a meaningful way is difficult and requires a lot of practice.

I like how the steps on the chart stay the same across the chapters while the contents are modified to match the focus on word choice.

One way we work on word choice in our writing is through poetry. When students are given a format that limits the number of words, like Haiku for example, they are pushed to more carefully consider their choices. How does one get the message across with fewer words – by choosing well. I think we could try reading closely for word choice using poetry.

I love the idea about using current events and making it "real" for kids like the hand-washing and the flu topic. Kids love gross and yucky things so I think it would be a high engagement activity.

Using the creation of word clouds to construct visible documentation of word choices in advertising, text, or even conversation is a powerful way for students to visualize connections and focus on which words have the most "power" in the text. I have used word clouds to show students which words they are using most in their writing, usually with the intent to extinguish the use of awesome, good, cool, and nice.

Chapter 4: If You Build It – A Study of Structure

This chapter focused on reading a text for structure, first to identify the actual “mechanics” of how it is organized and then to consider the author’s purpose for choosing that structure. This is a significant task to undertake, as students need many tools. They need an understanding of genre and the associated language. This can lead to a discussion of the features of each genre and how the author’s choice of genre impacts how the story and its elements are organized. Next, students need the language to describe the different parts of a text and how to find the location of events within the text. Much of this understanding is derived from a deeper understanding of the genre. Finally, students need to consider structure as an intentional decision by the author, part of his or her craft, and how that purposeful decision impacts the reader.

As a teacher of 4th graders, I find the analysis of structure to be a significant challenge for 9-10 year olds. We spend a great deal of time learning about different genres and understanding their hallmarks. This lens alone, looking at genre and the resulting organization of the text is a lot of learning for my students. Many 9-10 year olds are still quite literal in their comprehension and are just developing the tools to make inferences. Early in the year we do a genre study, comparing the features of fiction and non-fiction and then digging into the many genres under those umbrellas. Students learn to identify their favorite genres and make connections across multiple texts within a genre, looking for patterns in how they are organized. The structure of a fairy tale, for example, is a genre they are comfortable with describing the common features.

The vocabulary of location used to identify parts of the text is not a skill I have done much work on with children. This book has prompted me to question my practice of using kid friendly language and wonder if there is value, at this age, in introducing more precise vocabulary.

Going beyond identifying the structure to consider the author’s purpose is something I model with read aloud quite often. Many of my students are not very reflective in their independent reading, rarely stopping to consider structure or purpose. They are just beginning to understand that the author actually thought about these things prior to and during writing. Some students rarely consider the author at all unless prompted. Read aloud provides an opportunity to construct a group analysis and understanding of the text structure and a chance to have group discussion of what we think the author was trying to do. We have noticed texts that employ multiple narrators, use flashbacks, or even those that seem to be speaking directly to us. Sometimes we find the structure confusing and need to reread or ask questions of each other. After reading this chapter, I have some ideas to scaffold my students’ analysis of text structure and consideration of the author’s purpose for choosing that structure. I also love the idea of looking at the structures of life, like the school day schedule. Our district is evaluating the construct of our elementary school schedule and looking to build one that better supports student learning. What an opportunity to have students examine the current structure and how it impacts those who operate within it.

Chapter 5: Through Your Eyes – A Study of Point of View and Argument

This chapter discusses what may be the most valuable lens of all for our students. The ability to identify a point of view, understand the argument, and put forth a counterargument supported by evidence is a critical skill. We are bombarded daily with messages from social media, advertising, political messages, and even attempts by our friends and family to influence us. Developing the skills to identify and critically evaluate these messages is vital to help our students become competent and thoughtful citizens. We want our students to be savvy consumers of ideas with the tools to listen carefully and respectfully to others while making judgments based on an accurate assessment of the evidence.

My students do a good job of identifying various points of view in text, but we really have to work on lifting evidence from the text to support our assertions. Likewise, students can often state their opinion or point-of-view but aren't able to support it with an effective persuasive argument. Often students are most successful when they can make a personal connection with a character or cause in the text. When they share the point of view, they are better able to "see" it and to articulate an argument. The more challenging analysis is to look through the lens at points of view or arguments that they don't agree with. Teaching students to take the time to understand an opposing argument before arguing their own point of view requires students to value and respect the opinions of others. To develop empathy, students have to be aware of other people's feelings and perspectives.

Each year I work with my students on developing a piece of persuasive writing. Prior to beginning the writing process, we take the time to read and analyze arguments from several short texts on issues they can relate to like recess, school lunches, and screen time. The ideas in this chapter give me a new framework to use with my students and will help scaffold the process. First we can look at the point(s) of view in the text along with the supporting details or evidence. After that, we can look deeper and consider what makes the argument persuasive – or not. Examining the power of someone else's argument helps my students to strengthen their own arguments.

One of the new and important parts of our school curriculum is media literacy. This chapter speaks to the importance of educating our students on the techniques and structures of arguments in order to make informed decisions. Students need to also read closely for who is making the argument and how their own experiences and background may be influencing their point of view. This is intense and challenging work for elementary students, but I believe we can begin to lay the groundwork by exposing them to multiple points of view in text and asking them to pay attention. Awareness through close reading is something even our youngest students can do.

Chapter 6: Closely Reading Across Texts

Several things really resonated with me about this particular chapter. First of all was this idea that no one text “is an island”. Just as all individuals are viewed in the context of others, their environment, their history, and their experiences so too every text lives within a larger context. The amazing thing is that the context of the text depends on the experiences of the reader. Since the reader constructs their own understanding and meaning when they encounter a text, the act of comparing the text to others is inextricably connected to the individual’s reading history and meaning making. The second thought I had was how important it is for our students to read widely in order to build an inventory of text experiences to draw upon when making comparisons. For our students to read widely they need to have access to books that they want to read and lots of time to read them. They need teachers who model a love of reading and take the time to connect students with books that will inspire them to become habitual readers. The third thing that grabbed me was the reminder that in order to become wide readers students need to become fluent readers. For those still struggling with the mechanics of reading, the concept of reading across text can be daunting.

As I reflected on my own practice and the way in which I work with 4th and 5th grade readers, I was pleased to realize there are some routines in our classroom that would lend themselves nicely to comparisons across text. My students complete a weekly reading response about the books they are reading at home. This helps me to monitor and check-in with students about their independent reading, but we rarely look back at our old responses or compare them to each other. I think this would be a great way to have my students look for a lens to compare texts that they have already read. It also reinforces the importance of students being invested in their reading responses. The other strategy I think would be a great starting point for elementary students is an author study. I like to choose a prolific picture book author because all students can access the text. In the past we have looked at Christopher Van Allsburg, Patricia Polacco, Cynthia Rylant, and Tomie DePaola. We have also used book groups to examine multiple texts in a genre, differentiating text according to student ability.

Two new ideas I would like to try are reading pop culture like sitcoms or video games and using short texts to expand students’ reading inventory. My students spend a significant amount of time on screens, watching T.V. or playing video games. I think that using this experience to look for patterns would be fun and engaging. It might also help me understand what draws my students to the things they watch and play. Using short text would help my students have a larger repertoire to draw upon when considering what to compare, particularly if they aren’t avid readers.

The last section of the chapter talks about reading life by looking at our own personal context, family history, and the things that have shaped who we are. Each year, we begin building community and compassion in our classroom by creating self-portraits and writing an autobiographical piece. We look across this work, looking for what we have in common and the things that make each of us unique. The close reading ritual in this chapter could absolutely be applied to and enrich that work.

Chapter 7: I Believe in You – A Vision of Independence

This was my favorite chapter because it spoke to my beliefs as a progressive educator and teacher of young children. Specifically, the author discusses the ritual of close reading as one we hope will become habitual and ingrained in our students. As with all routines and rituals we work hard to establish, we gradually release responsibility to our students until they are capable of doing so independently. Beyond that, we want students to be draw on the skills and habits of the routines or rituals habitually, without being prompted or required to. We hope that the tools of the ritual will become so ingrained in our readers that they will access them almost spontaneously.

One of my strongest beliefs as an educator is that the establishment of rituals and routines with our students is critically important. A routine based environment fosters independence in our students who come to realize that they are capable and responsible for their own learning. Rituals free up our time for more creative thinking and allow for emergent curriculum. Much time is spent at the beginning of the school year establishing and practicing the routines that help our classroom run smoothly and support student independence. We cultivate a classroom where we share responsibility for taking care of the learning environment as well. For example, students have jobs that are part of our daily routine. I teach a 4th and 5th grade loop, meaning that we will stay together for 2 years. The power of that 2 year experience is particularly evident in how ingrained our rituals and routines become.

I appreciate the sample schedules suggesting how this ritual might be incorporated into the daily schedule and the reminder that close reading is just 1 part of our instruction. Our school district is examining the structure of our school day with the hope of restructuring it in a way the works better for student learning. While the concept is noble, and the intentions appear to be pure, they are constricted by a seemingly ever-growing list of standards and other curriculum that cannot reasonably be taught in the time given.

I read Donalyn Miller's book, *The Book Whisperer* over the summer. Her work resonates with my passion for reading as I believe that a child who loves reading can learn anything. I also like the reminder that what all students need in order to become stronger readers is TIME. We need to hold our ground on the knowledge that students need blocks of time to read and enjoy books. We need to protect and provide silent reading time as a sacred and critical part of developing readers and lifelong learners. She reminds us that reading is hard for everyone at one time or another and that our students need time to think, to process, to engage, and to immerse themselves in reading.