

# Understanding Close Reading

Mid-Continent Comprehensive Center (MC3)  
Regional ELL/CCSS Task Force  
Rosie García-Belina, Ed.D.

# Reading Complex Texts

- The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) require exposing EVERY student to complex texts.
- Starting in fourth grade, reading becomes a pedagogical tool to communicate information on topics to be read, studied, and learned.
- Complex texts provide students with access to academic language and how it works within different contexts.

# Why Complex Texts?

- Practically all complex texts contain language unfamiliar to almost every student, but it is critical for English language learners (ELLs) and minority students (MSs).
- ELLs and MSs need specific reading skills that teachers can provide through close reading practice.
- Teachers can include close reading in their everyday practice, as it will benefit every student, even those whose first language is English.

# What is Close Reading?

- Close reading means not only reading and understanding the meanings of the individual words, but also understanding thoroughly how the writer is using the words.
- Close reading is an organized way of analyzing a short text to determine how the ideas, concepts, and information embedded in the text work (Fillmore, 2012).

# In other words, close reading means...

- analyzing your reason for reading,
- understanding the author's purpose in writing,
- identifying the interconnection of ideas in the text, and
- looking for and understanding the meaning of language use.

# In close reading...

...the reader processes the content of the text and is able to answer these questions.

1. How do I summarize the meaning of this text in my own words?
2. Which examples from my own experience can I relate to what the text is saying?
3. What in the text is clear to me, and what do I need clarified?
4. Can I connect the central part of this text to other main ideas I understand?

# Looking Closely at Language, *One Sentence at a Time*

Drs. Lilly and Charles Fillmore (2010) suggest the following approach to working with complex texts:

1. Pre-select a grammatically complex sentence from the text on which to work.
2. Starting with an open-ended question or prompt, dedicate the first 20 minutes to lead students in a discussion about the content of the sentence.
3. Guide students on how to unpack the in-depth information contained in the academic text so eventually they learn how to be aware of and comprehend the relationship between the specific linguistic patterns and the functions they serve in the texts.

# Is this strategy evidence based?

Drs. Fillmore explain they have not conducted formal research on the effectiveness of the approach, but teachers and administrators in the participating schools are convinced the approach works because

- increased numbers of ELLs are passing New York's English language proficiency test;
- ELLs actually are outperforming non-ELL students in the ELA test given each year at lab sites; and
- after teachers began working on this approach in their classes, increased percentages of students are passing the Regent's Global History test.



# Useful Protocol

- Use a short passage.
- Read it at least two times.
- Identify the central idea.
- Mark the details you find in the passage with a marker or a pencil.
- Note what is confusing for you to understand.
- Analyze each part of the paragraph to understand it.
- Check patterns used by the writer.
- Identify the intent of the writer.
- Discuss the content of the passage using your own words.

# Dealing with the Language

Identify the context of the passage.

- Who is speaking? Who is the addressee? Is there an assumed "reader" other than the one to whom the passage is addressed? What is the situation in the book at this moment?

Categorize the language used.

- What makes this *particular* passage significant? Why should anybody care about it more than about any other passage that might be chosen?

# Example

Excerpt from M.L. King, Jr., Letter from Birmingham Jail

*“Begun on the margins of the newspaper in which the statement appeared while I was in jail, the letter was continued on scraps of writing paper supplied by a friendly Negro trusty, and concluded on a pad my attorneys were eventually permitted to leave me.”*

## Example (cont'd)

- An examination of this sentence shows three different “clauses” and the way in which they are organized into a complex sentence.
- The subject of the sentence is *the letter*, and the three clauses all express, in passive voice, facts about the letter’s creation: how it was *begun*, *continued*, and *concluded*.

# Example (cont'd)

## Close Reading Analysis

WHO (Actor): **M.L. King, Jr.**

WHAT HAPPENED (First Action):  
**continued**

WHAT (Recipient): **the letter**

DESCRIPTOR (Detail): **begun on  
the margins of the newspaper  
in which the statement  
appeared while I was in jail**

WHERE: **on scraps**

DESCRIPTOR (Detail): **of writing  
paper**

DESCRIPTOR (Detail): **supplied by  
a friendly Negro trusty**

WHO (ACTOR): **the writer**

WHAT HAPPENED (Second Action):  
**concluded**

WHAT (Recipient): **the letter**

WHERE: **on a pad**

DESCRIPTOR (Detail): **my  
attorneys were eventually  
permitted to leave me**

# Example (cont'd)

## Close Reading Analysis

### *The letter begun:*

on the margins  
of the newspaper  
in which the statement appeared  
while I was in jail,

[THE MARGINS OF WHAT?]  
[WHAT NEWSPAPER?]  
[WHEN WAS THAT?]

### *the letter was continued*

on scraps  
of writing paper  
supplied by a friendly Negro trusty,

[SCRAPS OF WHAT?]  
[WHERE DID THAT COME FROM?]  
[BY WHOM?]

### *The letter concluded*

on a pad  
my attorneys  
were eventually permitted  
to leave me.

[WHERE DID HE GET THAT?]

[WHO PERMITTED THEM TO  
LEAVE IT FOR HIM?]

# Close Reading - Checklist

- **Grammar** - the relationships of the words in sentences
- **Vocabulary** - the author's choice of individual words
- **Figures of speech** - the rhetorical devices used to give decoration and imaginative expression to literature, such as simile or metaphor
- **Literary devices** - the devices commonly used in literature to give added depth to the work, such as imagery or symbolism
- **Tone** - the author's attitude to the subject as revealed in the manner of the writing
- **Style** - the author's particular choice and combination of all these features of writing that creates a recognizable and distinctive manner of writing

# Conclusion

- The first time we read a text, we are busy absorbing information, and we cannot appreciate all the indirect connections there may be between its parts.
- A second reading (or even better, a third or fourth) will allow us to pull together and compare the meaning and the details in relationship to each other.
- Close reading requires a lot of reading to acquire the skills necessary to unpack the information in a complex text.
- Usually, such skills are learned unconsciously through the process of being able to read. We need continuous practice to master and use them when necessary.



# What does close reading accomplish?

- Close reading allows students to examine and dissect other features of the text.
- Talking about the text allows students to incorporate the author's language into their own speech.
- Students are able to interpret what the writer is trying to convey rather than only summarize the ideas

# Additional Resources

Fillmore L. & Fillmore C. (2012) What Does Text Complexity Mean for English Learners and Language Minority Students? Available at [http://ell.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/pdf/academic-papers/06-LWF%20CJF%20Text%20Complexity%20FINAL\\_0.pdf](http://ell.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/pdf/academic-papers/06-LWF%20CJF%20Text%20Complexity%20FINAL_0.pdf).

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Harad, A. (2010) A Five Minute Talk on How to Teach Close Reading: The Written Version. The University of Texas. Available at <http://efiles.cwrl.utexas.edu/node/152>.

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For additional information, please contact

**MC3 REGIONAL ELL/CCSS TASK FORCE**  
**c/o the University of Oklahoma**

Rosie García Belina, Ed.D., Coordinator

405.200.2242

[rbelina@ou.edu](mailto:rbelina@ou.edu)



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