Close Reading Exemplars and the CCSS

CLOSE READING EXEMPLARS DEFINED

Close Reading Exemplars pull together several key shifts within the CCSS in a single methodological approach towards reading texts. Close Reading Exemplars focus on investigating complex texts (**ANCHOR READING STANDARD 10**) via text dependent questions that rely on evidence and inferences to answer them (**ANCHOR READING STANDARD 1**). They direct students to pay close attention to academic vocabulary as it appears in context without preloading students with background knowledge of what they are about to read. By encouraging the sort of close reading techniques that lead students to proficiency and independence, close reading exemplars represent a critically important approach for students to experience in literacy and content specific classrooms.

KEY ELEMENTS OF CLOSE READING EXEMPLARS

While there are no hard and fast requirements for the design of close reading exemplars, teachers have found explanations and examples of the following elements helpful to have within them to assist in the implementation of close reading practices in the classroom.

- Goals for the Lesson

- Connection to the CCSS

- Full Text of the Reading Selection

- A Daily Structure within the Lesson that includes:
  - the day's text
  - text-dependent questions and tasks
  - a formative / cumulative writing assessment
- Extension Activities

CCSS LEARNING OBJECTIVES WITHIN CLOSE READING EXEMPLARS

READING COMPREHENSION: Students should be asked to read the day's passage both independently on their own and following along as the teacher or selected students read aloud. The class then explores the text through a set of concise text-dependent questions that compel students to reread and investigate specific portions of the text under consideration for evidence based answers. The multiple readings of the text combined with the text dependent questions serves as highly effective scaffolding.

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY: A number of text dependent questions in exemplars should ask students to explore the meaning of words in context. Such discussions help students develop an ability to employ contextual clues in determining the meaning of words as well as discern the author's intention in using the word and the nuances its use implies.

SYNTAX: Students should investigate complex sentences with particularly challenging syntax for their meaning and import. The close examination of such sentences will help students learn not only how they are built and convey meaning, but learn why the author decided to construct the sentence in this fashion.

DISCUSSION: By discussing the passage in depth with their teacher and classmates (and performing related activities that result in a close reading of the text), students grow in their confidence when reading complex texts and move in the direction of gradual release to independence.

WRITING: Students should be asked to craft short writing assignments about various aspects of the text (including responding in writing to the text-dependent questions and tasks posed throughout the lesson). The cumulative assessment is generally a written response as well that asks students to draw together what they have learned about the text.

Design Principles and Close Reading Exemplars

Read the Text Afresh: Rather than approach the text with preconceived notions of what it says, read the text like a student would experience it, noting difficult words, sentences, and ideas as they occur. These will be places to return to and consider whether a text dependent question would be helpful to ask in order to push student comprehension forward.

Note the Breaks: Find the natural "resting points"—places where the writer has summed up a train of thought, made a particularly important point, or shifted perspective—and treat the "chunks" of text created by these breaks as organic units of text worth investigating on their own. Consider spending a class session within the lesson on one or more of these sections, and keep in mind the need to stitch these parts together to create an understanding of the greater whole.

Be Strategic: Not every little detail can be unpacked, nor each argument be explored in its entirely. Identify the most important information in the text and concentrate on making sure students grasp it fully versus touch on every possible point being made but without any depth of learning. If comparing two or more texts, make sure students grasp the meaning of each first.

Allow for Discovery: Do not include activities or pre-reading instructions that rob students of the experience of encountering complex text and inferring understandings from it. Be ready to help students unpack the meaning of the text when they hit a roadblock in their understanding, but do not anticipate what those will be by pre-teaching the meaning of the text that reading the text itself will lead them to discover.

Articulate the Goal: Whether at the outset of the design process or after the text dependent questions have been formulated, spell out what the essential take away points are for students, and make sure that the questions asked lead students to discovering this understanding of the text.

End with Writing: Develop a worthwhile culminating writing activity around the key idea that students can complete independently which requires them to provide evidence to assess their understanding of the text through the prism of one or more of the CCS standards.

Close Reading Exemplars and Text Dependent Questions

While there is no formula for creating a complete and coherent set of text dependent questions for a particular text, teachers have found the following rules of thumb useful to consider:

Start Small: Build the initial text dependent questions based on the belief that there are important questions that need to be answered about the text early on that are also confidence boosters when students are able to answer them correctly.

Look for Confusions: Tackle those that are the most confusing based on the vocabulary used, sentence structure employed, or meaning that is implied.

Note What's Missing: Consider formulating questions that ask students to investigate not only the words/phrases/ideas/arguments present in the text but also what is missing and why that might be so.

Check for Coverage: Examine whether or not the sequence of questions flow logically, that there is a balance in the types of questions being asked, and whether the questions as a whole lead students to discover the key insights within the text.

Build Towards Synthesis: Later questions regarding a chunk of text (as well as questions that link chunks together) should circle back and ask students to draw up the evidence they have collected answering earlier questions and ask students to make inferences based on what they have learned.