

Quick Reference Guide: Reading Closely to Analyze Complex Texts in the Secondary Grades

This Guide examines the instructional practice of teaching students to read a text closely and analytically. This approach focuses on *determining what a complex text means by examining word choice, figurative language, and the structure of sentences, paragraphs, or sections (Anchor Standards 1, 4, and 5 for Reading)* and *being able to cite evidence for conclusions (Anchor Standard 1 for Reading)*.¹ One caution – close analytical reading *isn't* equally appropriate for all texts! It is most effectively applied to poetry or short complex texts with multiple layers of meaning and nuanced vocabulary, or to excerpts from larger complex texts that might be difficult because of their unfamiliar topic or style of writing.² The technique simply is not usually needed for texts with literal, straightforward ideas, simple sentence structures, and familiar vocabulary.

Key Massachusetts Anchor Standards for Reading Closely to Analyze Complex Texts

- Standard 1: Read closely to determine what a text states explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from a text.
- Standard 4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
- Standard 5: Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of a text relate to each other and the whole.

Reading closely for the purpose of analyzing texts often involves re-reading a difficult passage several times in order to determine meaning. In English language arts classes, reading closely includes study of words and phrases in the text, answering text-dependent questions, and discussion that often leads to written analysis.



Close reading analysis promotes integration of standards from each of the strands. It brings into play Anchor Standards 1, 4, and 5 for Reading. By design, these standards are echoed in Anchor Standards 4 and 5 for Language. Discussion (Anchor Standard for Speaking and Listening 1) helps students clarify their ideas, and writing an argument about an interpretation of a work (Anchor Standard for Writing 1) helps them connect evidence from a text.

Text-Dependent Questions

Creating good questions that lead students to discover the meanings of a complex text is an art in itself. A useful short guide to developing text-dependent questions can be found at <http://achievethecore.org/page/45/short-guide-to-creating-text-dependent-questions>

¹ This Guide uses Anchor Standards for simplicity, but in the classroom a teacher would use the corresponding grade-level Standards.

² See Timothy Shanahan, shanahanonliteracy.com, [A Fine Mess: Confusing Close Reading and Text Complexity](#), August 3, 2016 and [Poetry: Close Reading](#) Online Writing Lab (OWL), Purdue University

“Sympathy” by American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, a work that has appeared on the [Grade 8 ELA/Literacy Reading Comprehension section of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System](#), is an example of a poem with multiple levels of meaning. By examining Dunbar’s use of imagery in structured readings and discussions, students can develop their interpretation of the poem. A close reading lesson on “Sympathy” might follow this sequence:

1. The teacher introduces the poem with little background information. Students silently read copies of the printed poem individually.
2. A student reads the poem aloud as the class pays attention to examples of figurative language, rhyme, and repetition. (Anchor Standards 4 and 5 for Reading)
3. The teacher reads the first stanza aloud again and models how she notices unusual vocabulary and makes inferences about meanings of words, phrases, and the stanza as a whole. (Anchor Standards 1, 4, and 5 for Reading)
4. In small groups, students discuss and write notes in their journals in response to text-dependent questions, such as how the words, “pain,” “scar,” and “sting” affect Stanza 2. (Anchor Standards 4 and 5 for Reading; Anchor Standard 1 for Speaking and Listening)
5. Using their notes, students write individual short essays in response to the question, “What is an important turning point in the mood of this poem? Use evidence – lines, individual words or phrases, rhyme scheme – from the text to support your argument.” They discuss their conclusions and evidence. (Anchor Standards 1, 4, and 5 for Reading; Anchor Standard 1 for Writing; Anchor Standard 1 for Speaking and Listening)

Sympathy

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!
When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
When the wind stirs oft through the springing grass,
And the river flows like a stream of glass;
When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,
And the faint perfume from its chalice steals—
I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing
Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
For he must fly back to his perch and cling
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;
And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
And they pulse again with a keener sting—
I know why he beats his wing!

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart’s deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—
I know why the caged bird sings!

— Paul Laurence Dunbar, 1899

Going Beyond Close Reading of a Single Work: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

Reading Standards 7 through 9 invite readers to compare texts to learn more about their contexts and find out how others have approached similar themes. In the case of “Sympathy,” students can learn more about the circumstances of Dunbar’s life at the time he wrote the poem by reading [“The Caged Bird Sings” – Paul Dunbar at the Library of Congress](#) by Peter Armenti. They can also compare “Sympathy” to the later poem it inspired: Maya Angelou’s “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.”