

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

“Who Has Seen the Wind?” by English poet Christina Rossetti, is an example of a poem with multiple levels of meaning. By examining Rossetti’s use of imagery and repetition in structured readings and discussions, students can decide what the poet wanted to convey. A close reading lesson on “Who Has Seen the Wind” might follow this sequence:

1. The teacher introduces the poem with a minimum of background information. Students silently read copies of the printed poem individually.
2. A student or the teacher reads the poem aloud, as the class pays attention to examples of similar sounds and rhymes at end of lines (*who/you/through; I/by*) and to the structure of the two stanzas. (Anchor Standards 4 and 5 for Reading)
3. The teacher reads the first stanza aloud again and models finding an unusual phrase: what does it mean that leaves “hang trembling?” She tells what she notices about the first and second lines: they’re a question and answer, but who is the speaker? First the poet tells us we can’t see the wind; then she tells us something we *can* see. What’s the connection? Why does she first answer “Neither I nor you” in the first stanza and then “Neither you nor I” in the second? (Anchor Standards 1, 4, and 5 for Reading)
4. In small groups, students write questions about Stanza 2 for the class to discuss. Can trees really “bow down their heads?” What does the poet mean by that line? Why does she use the words “tremble” and “bow down”? The teacher records the questions and asks students how Stanza Two is the same as, yet different from Stanza One and students write answers in their journals. (Anchor Standards 1, 4, and 5 for Reading; Anchor Standard 1 for Speaking and Listening)
5. Students draw quick sketches to show what they think Rossetti had in mind about how trees move when the wind “is passing by.” Using their journals, students write and draw individual compositions in response to the questions, “What does the poet tell us about seeing the wind? How do you know? Do you like this poem? Why or why not?” They share their interpretations and opinions in a class presentation and exhibition. (Anchor Standards 1, 4, and 5 for Reading; Anchor Standard 1 for Speaking and Listening; Anchor Standard 1 for Writing)

Who Has Seen the Wind?

Who has seen the wind?
Neither I nor you:
But when the leaves hang trembling,
The wind is passing through.

Who has seen the wind?
Neither you nor I:
But when the trees bow down their heads,
The wind is passing by.

– Christina Rossetti, 1872

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 other authors have approached similar themes. “Who Has Seen the Wind?” could be just one of many works on weather – some prose, some poetry, some literary, some informational, some written texts, some pictures, some musical compositions – that students read, view, and hear as they learn how scientists, poets, visual artists, and musicians interpret the changing world.