

So if responding personally to text isn't leading students to deeper understanding, then where should teachers turn to help students improve their comprehension? We should turn to the text itself.

Enter close reading.

Reread that PARCC definition of close reading—closely—to extract key concepts. You might identify these ideas: examining meaning thoroughly and analytically; directing attention to the text, central ideas, and supporting details; reflecting on meanings of individual words and sentences; and developing ideas over the course of the text. Notice that reader reflection is still integral to the process. But close reading goes beyond that: The best thinkers do monitor and assess their thinking, but in the context of processing the thinking of others (Paul & Elder, 2008)

Great, you may be thinking. I reread that passage. I processed. I monitored. And I agree that close reading will likely produce deeper understanding. But how do I get these concepts off the page and into my elementary school classroom? Here are three fruitful practices.

Use Short Texts

Most teachers subscribe to the belief that when students can read longer text, that's what they should read. Although we don't want to abandon longer texts, we should recognize that studying short texts is especially helpful if we want to enable students with a wide range of reading levels to practice closely reading demanding texts (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012).

The Common Core standards suggest several genres of short text, both literary and informational, that can work at the elementary level. Many kinds of traditional literature—folktales, legends, myths, fables, as well as short stories, poetry, and scenes from plays—enable and reward close reading. For informational works, try short articles, biographies, personal narratives, and even some easier primary-source materials, such as Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, the preamble to the U.S. Constitution, or sayings from *Poor Richard's Almanac*. Appendix B of the Common Core State Standards notes numerous picture books that can be used with younger readers. Because children's listening comprehension outpaces their reading comprehension in the early grades, it's important that your students build knowledge through being read to as well as through independent reading, with the balance gradually shifting to silent, independent reading.

When students are learning a process, such as how to search for a recurring theme, reading short texts allows them to make more passes through the entire sequence of a text. It could take weeks or even months to read through a 100-page novel to identify a theme or concepts related to the text as a whole. A short text of a page or two can be digested in one lesson.

Aim for Independence

Go Beyond "Ho-Hum" Questions

It's our responsibility as educators to build students' capacity for *independently* comprehending a text through close reading. There's some controversy, however, as to how we should go about doing this.

One organization, Student Achievement Partners—until recently led by David Coleman, a lead author of the Common Core standards—suggests that we accomplish this through "text-dependent questions." Coleman and colleagues (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012) advocate asking a sequence of questions that will lead students more deeply into a text. As an example, the organization's website presents this series of questions for 3rd graders, referring to the equivalent of 11 very sparse pages taken from Chapters 6 and 7 of Kate DiCamillo's novel *Because of Winn-Dixie* (Candlewick, 2000):

- Why was Miss Franny so scared by Winn-Dixie? Why was she "acting all embarrassed"?
- How did the Herman W. Block Memorial Library get its name?
- Opal says, "She looked sad and old and wrinkled." What happened to cause Miss Franny to look this way?
- What were Opal's feelings when she realized how Miss Franny felt?
- Earlier in the story, Opal says that Winn-Dixie "has a large heart, too." What does Winn-Dixie do to show that he has a "large heart"?
- Opal and Miss Franny have three very important things in common. What are these? (Student Achievement Partners, 2012)

The culminating task for this exemplar activity is to explain in writing why *Because of Winn-Dixie* is an appropriate title.

These are decent questions, requiring both literal and inferential thinking, but they fall short in several ways. First, none of them will generate real discussion; they all have basically a right answer, even those that don't call for verbatim "facts" from the story. Second, they are fairly ho-hum as questions go, sticking closely to the kinds of things we typically ask young readers. And asking students to justify a title when they have 19 more chapters to read seems a bit premature if you're looking for deep thinking based on the best evidence.

Most of these questions align only with Common Core English Language Arts and Literacy Anchor Standard 1: finding evidence in the text. A couple of the questions address characters' feelings (Standard 3); and the last question delves into the author's message (Standard 2). But we didn't need the Common Core standards to push us to ask questions like these. Teachers are already quite good at asking questions about *what* the author is saying.