

The CCSS, Close Reading, and Text Dependent Questions

CCSS and Close Reading

The Anchor Standards for Reading found in the Common Core State Standards privilege the task of extracting evidence and making inferences (Standard 1) from complex text (Standard 10). The intervening standards (2-9) all call on students to perform a range of tasks when reading texts that critically rely on the central skill of “citing specific textual evidence” to “support conclusions” (Standard 1). This text dependent approach towards reading is one of the fundamental shifts embodied in the CCSS, and moving students and teachers towards embracing this close reading model is a key step to implementing the CCSS.

Close Reading Defined

A significant body of research links the close reading of complex text — whether the student is a struggling reader or advanced — to significant gains in reading proficiency and finds close reading to be a key component of college and career readiness.¹ **Close reading** is the methodical investigation of a complex text through answering **text dependent questions** geared to demystify its meaning. Close reading directs students to examine and analyze the text itself through a series of activities that focus student learning on the meanings of individual words and sentences as well as the development of events and ideas. It forces students to extract evidence from the text as well as draw inferences that logically follow from what they have read. This sort of careful attention to how the text unfolds allows students to assemble—through discussion and in writing—an overarching picture of the text as a whole as well as grasp the fine details on which that understanding rests. Ultimately, close reading motivates students by rewarding them for reading inquisitively and discovering the beauty and insight within the text that makes it worthy of reading carefully.

Text Dependent Questions Defined

An effective set of text dependent questions first and foremost embraces the key role of providing evidence from the text and drawing inferences based on what the text explicitly says (Reading Standard 1). A close look at the associated reading standards 2-9 reveals that the variety of tasks they call on students to perform all critically rely on consulting the text for answers. Hence grasping the nature of a text dependent question is crucial for correctly addressing the cognitive demands of the standards.

As the name suggests, a text dependent question specifically asks a question that can only be answered by referring explicitly back to the text being read. It does not rely on any particular information

¹ Ericsson, K. A., and W. Kintsch. 1993. “The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance.” *Psychological Review* 100(3):363–406; Plant, E. A., et al. 2005. “Why Study Time Does Not Predict Grade Point Average Across College Students: Implications of Deliberate Practice for Academic Performance.” *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 30; Ericsson, K. A., and W. Kintsch. 1999. “The Role of Long Term Working Memory in Text Comprehension.” *Psychologia*; Kintsch, W. 2009. “Learning and Constructivism.” *Constructivist Instruction: Success or Failure?* eds. Tobias and Duffy. New York: Routledge; Hampton, S., and E. Kintsch. 2009. “Supporting Cumulative Knowledge Building Through Reading.” In *Adolescent Literacy, Field Tested: Effective Solutions for Every Classroom*, eds. Parris, Fisher, and Headley. International Reading Association; Heller, R., and C. Greenleaf. 2007. *Literacy Instruction in the Content Areas: Getting to the Core of Middle and High School Improvement*. Washington, D.C.: Alliance for Excellent Education; The Education Trust. 2006. *Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground: How Some High Schools Accelerate Learning for Struggling Students*; ACT. 2006. *Reading Between the Lines*.

extraneous to the text nor depend on students having other experiences or knowledge; instead it privileges the text itself and what students can extract from what is before them. By way of an example, look at Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address*:

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate —we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Consider the following pairs of questions:

Non-text Dependent	Text Dependent
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Why did the North fight the civil war?</i> • <i>Have you ever been to a funeral or gravesite?</i> • <i>Lincoln says that the nation is dedicated to the proposition that “all men are created equal.” Why is equality an important value to promote?</i> • <i>Did Lincoln think that the North was going to “pass the test” that the civil war posed?</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What is the point of including the phrase “any nation so conceived and so dedicated”?</i> • <i>What are the assembled people doing at Gettysburg?</i> • <i>What is the effect when Lincoln says “But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate---we can not consecrate---we can not hallow---this ground.”</i> • <i>Look carefully at Lincoln’s speech. Which verb does he use the most (sometime he uses it in the past tense). What does it mean the first two times Lincoln uses it, and what other verb is closely linked to it those first two times it appears? How is it used the next two times? What is unique about the way Lincoln uses it the final two times?</i>

While questions like those in the first column undoubtedly will generate conversation in the classroom, they will not move students closer to understanding the text itself. Such questions cannot be answered by consulting the text, but instead rely on a mix of personal opinion, background information students

may not have, or imaginative speculation on the part of the reader to answer them. By contrast, those questions in the second column draw the reader back to the text.

An effective text dependent question delves into a text to guide students in extracting the key meanings or ideas found there. To achieve this end, text dependent questions explore specific words, details, and arguments. They target academic vocabulary and crucial passages—be they single sentences or larger portions of the text—as focal points for gaining comprehension. Grouped together, they systematically explore the impact of the details revealed by text dependent questions and integrate those findings into a coherent whole. Yet this focus on textual specificity is not an end in itself; rather, it serves as a method for how to teach students to perform the core tasks spelled out in reading standards 2-9:

- Determining central ideas or themes and analyze their development (Standard 2)
- Summarizing the key supporting details and ideas (Standard 2)
- Analyzing how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact (Standard 3)
- Interpret the meaning of words and phrases (Standard 4)
- Analyzing how specific word choices shape meaning or tone (Standard 4)
- Investigate the structure of specific sentences, paragraphs, and sections of text (Standard 5)
- Analyze how portions of the text relate to each other and the whole (Standard 5)
- Assessing how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style (Standard 6)
- Integrating and evaluating content presented in diverse media and formats (Standard 7)
- Delineating and evaluating the specific claims and overarching argument (Standard 8)
- Assessing the validity of the reasoning (Standard 8)
- Assessing the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence (Standard 8)
- Analyzing how two or more texts address similar themes or topics (Standard 9)

As a result of juxtaposing a focus on the text itself with the specific cognitive demands of the reading standards, text dependent questions offer a systematic approach towards reading complex text.

Generating Text-Dependent Questions

An effective set of text dependent questions delves systematically into a text to guide students in extracting the key meanings or ideas found there. They typically begin by exploring specific details, and arguments and then move on to examine the impact of those specifics on the text as a whole. Along the way they target academic vocabulary and specific sentence structures as critical focus points for gaining comprehension.

While there is no set process for generating a complete and coherent body of text dependent questions for a text, the following process is a good guide that can serve to generate a core series of questions for close reading of any given text.

Step One: Identify the Core Understandings and Key Ideas of the Text

As in any good reverse engineering or “backwards design” process, start by identifying the key insights you want students to understand from the text—keeping *one eye on the major points* being made is crucial for fashioning an overarching set of successful questions and critical for creating an appropriate culminating assignment. Keep the *other eye on the standards* you want to emphasize and for which the

text is well suited. Many times a text-based question will naturally emerge simply by considering why a student might struggle with understanding the particular textual passage.

Step Two: Start Small to Build Confidence

Make opening questions ones that help orientate students to the text and be sufficiently specific enough for them to answer so that they gain confidence to tackle more difficult questions later on. Find at least one critical word, phrase, sentence, or text structure to focus on. The focus can be as broad as the interplay between sentences and the relationships between paragraphs or as narrow as unpacking figurative language in a particular phrase or investigating how meaning could be altered by changing a key word. Text dependent questions might also examine how the author explicitly shifts in the direction of an argument or explanation or take note of what they leave uncertain or unstated.

Step Three: Target Vocabulary, Syntax, and Text Structure

For each word, determine whether it can be deciphered in context or needs to be glossed for students outright. Make a note to push students towards defining those words that can be understood in context. Note as well sentences that are particularly complex and which might prove daunting for students to decode on their own. While the syntax of many of these sentences will receive adequate attention via text dependent questions that address other important aspects of the text, sentences that are particularly challenging—whether because of their surface use of punctuation or the deeper grammatical structure conveyed by the punctuation—merit direct and careful consideration to further student comprehension. In addition, locate key text structures in the text that are connected to the key ideas and understandings, and craft questions that illuminate these connections.

Step Four: Tackle Tough Sections Head-on

Find the sections of the text that will present the greatest difficulty and craft questions that support students in mastering these sections (these could be sections with difficult syntax, particularly dense information, or tricky transitions or places that offer a variety of possible inferences).

Step Five: Create Coherent Sequences of Text Dependent Questions

Make sure your sequence of questions build toward more coherent understanding and analysis to ensure that students learn to stay focused on the text to bring them to a gradual understanding of its meaning. Do the questions logically flow and build upon one another, or are their gaps that need to be addressed with additional questions? Do the questions asked identify a series of key insights that ultimately lead students to a deep understanding of the text, or do they feel disconnected and disparate? Take stock of what standards have been addressed in the series of questions and decide if any other standards are suited to being a focus for this text (forming additional questions that exercise those standards).

Step Six: Create the Culminating Assessment

Make sure that students are tasked with some sort of summing up or synthesis activity from what they have gleaned through their close reading. Probe each argument in persuasive text, each idea in informational text, and each key detail in literary text. Make sure the culminating assessment reflects (a) mastery of one or more of the standards, (b) involves writing, and (c) is structured to be completed by students independently.

