

Unlocking the SECRETS of Complex Text



Mary Ehrenworth

If you ever find yourself at a live baseball game with a dominant pitcher, you might experience one of those evenings in which you see no runs or even hits. Such games cause baseball enthusiasts to exult, and they drive the rest of the population into a torpid boredom. To the experienced “reader” of baseball, who is alert to what is happening on the field as well in the batter’s box, a shutout game is full of intricacy and drama, crucial decisions, and debatable moments. To the novice baseball reader, it’s a game in which nothing happens.

We want students to be positioned to read complex nonfiction the way the expert reader of baseball reads the game—staying alert to the nuances and challenges of complex texts, to the reading work such texts demand, and to how they reward close reading (or whatever you want to call such alert, attentive reading). “Like any other art, craft, or sport, reading becomes more rewarding as we master its intricacies to higher degrees,” writes Robert Scholes (1989, p. 18). Scholes suggests that texts release their secrets to those who come ready to see more.

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By engaging students in analyzing the intricacies of complex texts, we can transform their ideas about what it means to read.



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Our job is to instill in students a deep sense of engagement with the intricacies of complex texts, to rouse them to see more in the texts they read—and to do this in a way that makes them want to read more. That means that readers need to feel their work paying off. Threatening them with hard state tests or future tasks in high school or college is not an effective teaching methodology (even if students will face these challenges). You can't discipline students into becoming insightful.

John Dewey (1909/1975) asks, "Who can reckon up the loss of moral power that arises from the constant impression that nothing is worth doing in itself, but only as a preparation for something else?" (p. 25). More recently, Timothy Shanahan (2013) notes that although many versions of close reading have been espoused in the wake of the Common Core State

Standards, we need to remember that close reading is an outcome, not a technique.

The truth is, learning to see more in dense and complicated texts is an end in itself. Discernment, perception, and heightened awareness all bring heightened pleasure.

This close reading work will pay off most, of course, on real texts, such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s speeches. It probably won't pay off on textbooks that are already summaries, or on tiny nonfiction excerpts. It will pay off most on texts that kids find inherently fascinating (Allington & Gabriel, 2012); that seem relevant to the identities they are building (Tatum, 2005); and that they are reading for real reasons (Duke & Pearson, 2002). That might mean periodicals such as *Ranger Rick*, *Junior Scholastic*, or *Upfront Magazine*. It might mean science trade books by Gail Gibbons, Seymour Simon, or Brian

Greene. It might mean videos by Nova, National Geographic, or Ken Burns. That is, real texts that real people read for knowledge and pleasure.

Hattie's research (2011) suggests that when you want to accelerate students' progress toward a goal, it helps if they have a clear vision of what they are trying to achieve. The following close-reading practices will promote such a vision.

Reading for Multiple and Implicit Ideas

When we teach students to expect that most texts are about more than one thing, we lead them to read more closely. It's also helpful to alert students that a lot of the nonfiction they read won't make every idea explicit through a heading or subheading, so they need to read for underlying, implicit ideas as well as explicit, surface ones.

To get students to read this way, first choose a text that will reward this work. You're looking for text that is *accessible*, *engaging*, and *complex*: *accessible* because if you introduce new, hard thinking work using new, hard texts, kids will struggle on all fronts; *engaging* because if students are engaged, they're willing to work hard; and *complex* so that if they do the work, it pays off—they gain new insights and epiphanies. The act of personally deriving new understandings produces intellectual and physical satisfaction; it actually releases endorphins into the brain (Rock, 2007).

To create opportunities for these epiphanies, you'll have to look at possible texts and sort out the difference between *difficult* and *complex*. A textbook might be difficult, but it might not be sufficiently complex if it has already laid out the thinking work for its readers. A high-quality non-fiction trade book, on the other hand, might seem easier at first glance, but if it's well-written and conveys multiple ideas, its complexity will reward close reading. Our job is to teach readers to expect to do this thinking work. The book's job is to make it rewarding.

For instance, take *Shark Attack!* by Cathy Dubowski (Dorling Kindersley,

2009), a nonfiction text that moves back and forth from narrative to exposition. It starts out with the true story of Rodney Fox, who was attacked by a great white shark while spearfishing in Australian waters. The first chapter presents Rodney's struggle with the shark as he is first bitten, then nearly swallowed, then dragged into the deep. It's a gory, Homeric epic. Through it all, Rodney fights back, eventually making it to the surface damaged but alive.

After that harrowing tale, *Shark Attack!* offers facts about different species of sharks, especially the ones that are "really dangerous" (p. 15). Then it offers another true account of a shark following his victim up onto the sands of an Australian beach, where the shark savages the swimmer as six lifeguards wrestle with it. And in case you would consider ever swimming again, you next read about a bull shark that made its way into a freshwater creek in New Jersey. (Nothing good happens there, either.)

As the book moves from narrative to expository text, it also moves from an ominous tone to an oddly cheerful one (as you find out about handy shark repellent and protective metal cages) that's somehow even more chilling. It's the kind of fascinating and horrifying book you'd find on many shelves for young readers, alongside the eagerly read books on weather disasters, venomous snakes, and lethal insects—books that get kids interested in nonfiction by terrifying them. It's also the kind of complex nonfiction—full of dense information, implicit ideas, and multiple perspectives—that will reward close reading.

To do this reading work, first identify the book's central idea—that sharks are dangerous. It doesn't take much reading work for students to recognize that idea, so don't name that as close reading. To teach students to work harder and see more, you have to transform their expectations.

Paired Texts on Shared Topics

To show students how different texts can give different perspectives on the same topic, have them compare these texts.

Gail Gibbons, *Snakes*
(Holiday House, 2010)



Seymour Simon, *Snakes*
(HarperCollins, 2007)

Gail Gibbons, *The Planets*
(Holiday House, 2008)



Seymour Simon, *Our Solar System*
(HarperCollins, 2007)

Gail Gibbons, *Planet Earth/Inside Out*
(Harper Collins, 1998)



Seymour Simon, *Earth*
(HarperCollins, 2003)

Kathy Dubowski, *Shark Attack!*
(Dorling Kindersley, 2009)



Seymour Simon, *Sharks*
(HarperCollins, 2006)

Joy Hakim, Chapter 15: Rosa Parks Was Tired in *History of Us: Since 1945* (Oxford University Press, 2008)



Howard Zinn, Chapter 5: "Black Revolt and Civil Rights," in *A Young People's History of the United States: Class Struggle to the War on Terror* (Seven Stories Press, 2007)

Paul Revere, *The Boston Massacre*, woodcut, 1770



Patrick Henry, "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death," 1775

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "I Have a Dream," 1963



President John F. Kennedy, "Civil Rights Address," 1963

Note: For access to more nonfiction texts sets assembled around shared topics, see the Reading and Writing Project (<http://readingandwritingproject.com/resources/classroom-libraries/text-sets.html>), which lists digital nonfiction text sets offering multiple perspectives on disputed issues; Buzzle (www.buzzle.com), which offers accessible texts sifted by topic and issue; and Newspapermap (<http://newspapermap.com>), which provides access to front-page newspaper articles from around the globe.

You might say something like, “Chances are that this book, like so many, teaches more than one thing, and some of those things may not be obvious at first. The question readers ask themselves is, ‘What else does this text teach?’”

Even though your teaching point aims to be transferable across texts, your demonstration needs to be specific so that students see what close-reading work actually looks like and realize that it’s worth it to read this way. So next, do a bit of a demonstration that is specific to the text. In *Shark Attack!*, for instance, you might demonstrate how you could return to the account of the New Jersey creek attack and think aloud that although it’s true that this section teaches that sharks are dangerous, it also suggests that people often help each other when there’s danger. Leave room for students to build on your work, saying something like, “I wonder whether that idea runs through any other parts of the book—whether any other details support it? Hmm . . . and what other ideas does this book suggest?” The feeling in the room will be that you are coauthoring this work with your students. But you’re also shifting their expectations of what it means to think as you read.

Then you want to give kids a chance to practice in your shared, familiar text. When they try reading this way in *Shark Attack!*, young readers tend to articulate implicit ideas like, “It’s true that it teaches sharks are dangerous, but it also shows that you can survive shark attacks—that people can be tough.” Whatever ideas students propose, you want to pose two questions: “What in the text makes you say that?” and “What other ideas does the text suggest? What details support those ideas?”

You’ll probably want to offer this



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instruction in a minilesson, in which you do some shared reading of parts of a text that you’ve already introduced through a read-aloud (Calkins, 2010). That way students can work on close reading instead of working on initial comprehension. You might return to certain pages of the book by flipping through them on a document camera, showing them on an interactive smart-board, or giving kids copies to share. You might model how you look back over some pages, pushing yourself to name more than one idea by reconsidering what the stories, illustrations, lists, charts, and statistics teach (Calkins & Tolan, 2010). Then turn to other pages and invite students to give it a try.

Developing Structures for Transference

Chances are, if a teacher does the work described above using instructional read-alouds and shared reading, the teacher and the students will discern more than one idea about sharks and

humans. But if that’s all that happens, students may not realize that the reading work they did was transferable. They’ll think it was *Shark Attack!* work.

One method to increase transference is to pay attention to the language you use as you’re teaching and to consistently refer to the students’ reading experiences outside the shared text. Use such phrases as, “Just like the nonfiction books you’re reading independently, this book probably has more than one central idea,” and “Whatever you’re reading, I bet you’re learning more than one thing.”

You can also shorten the time between when students do this work with a teacher and when they try it out on other texts. Invite kids to bring the texts they are reading independently to the minilesson, and say,

You know, this is not just *Shark Attack!* work. This should pay off in the other books or articles you’re reading. So right now, get your book or article out. First, remind yourself of what you’ve been reading, and tell your partner one big idea your text is teaching. Then, go back to the text and see if you can find *another* idea the text suggests. Put your finger on the place where you realized the text was suggesting that new idea, and then argue your point quickly with your partner. Show what details in the text support your idea.

One more structure that will aid transference is the opportunity for repeated practice on a variety of texts, with calibrated feedback along the way. Hattie (2011) found that feedback in the midst of work, followed by the chance to put that feedback into play, dramatically improves student achievement. You should therefore ask yourself, Once I teach this, where in the curriculum will students get a chance to keep working on it? In middle and high school, that undoubtedly means

planning curriculum strategically across the disciplines.

Analyzing Craft

As readers learn to ask themselves what a text is teaching them, we also want them to analyze *how* the text is teaching them. One way to do this work is to trace not only the ideas the text suggests but also the emotional response of the reader and what causes it. Reading is transactional—the text has an effect on the reader, and the alert reader pays attention to his or her response (Rosenblatt, 1982).

When you introduce this work, choose a text in which the emotional response is quite visceral so that readers get a sense of what it feels like to actively respond to nonfiction. Young readers who do this work on *Shark Attack!*, for instance, will often say that the book instills feelings of fear and tension. When you ask them to analyze what causes that fear, they may begin by noting the illustrations, especially those indelible images of Rodney caught in the shark's jaws. Some will also say it's the stories of horrific attacks. Some will note the shocking statistics. If you give students a chance to go back to the text and look closely at parts of it again, looking for the writer's craft, they'll often notice the capital letters, violent language, and exclamatory grammar: "Shark attack!" "CRASH!" "SNAP!" (pp. 4–9).

Here, you are teaching students that there are predictable questions readers can ask as they read to get more out of their reading: What does this text teach me? What does it make me feel? When students read with these lenses, they'll begin to notice that nonfiction authors use persuasive techniques and literary devices to make their points and get their readers to care. So they can also ask themselves, What techniques or craft does the author employ? What effect do these techniques have?

Some Questions Readers Might Pose

Close Readers Might Begin by Asking These Questions:

- What does this text want me to know? What information does this text teach?
- What does this text want me to understand? What new ideas and concepts does it suggest?
- What does this text want me to feel? What emotions does it stir up?
- How does it accomplish these tasks?

Close and Critical Readers Might Then Ask These Questions:

- Whose perspective is represented in this text?
- Whose point of view is most fully explored?
- Who is honored or privileged in the text and how? Who is marginalized?
- How does the perspective in this text compare with others on this issue?
- How does the author use persuasive techniques, literary devices, or writerly craft to convey meaning?

Choosing texts that make the writer's craft visible will help students see how informational texts work. When adults read nonfiction, we read it with years of experience with lots of other texts in our minds, so it's easier for us to see what the author is doing. Kids are building that store of knowledge with each text they analyze and each task they set themselves.

Developing Critical Stances

Many kids, on the basis of years of learned belief, subscribe to the notion that nonfiction is true; fiction is not. Once again, your teaching is about shifting readers' expectations. You'll want to teach students that nonfiction

is not just "the truth"; it's someone's perspective on the truth. Students can only come to this realization if you ensure that they have opportunities to read more than one text on a subject. (See "Paired Texts on Shared Topics" on p. 18 for some ideas.)

As a starting point, assemble text sets that offer different perspectives on shared topics. For example, when you put Cathy Dubowski's *Shark Attack!* next to Seymour Simon's *Sharks* (Harper Collins, 2006), the content, craft, and perspective of each become more apparent. Or gather sources on some controversial topics, and then add to students' reading lenses questions such as those in "Some Questions Readers Might Pose."

Ultimately, we want students to feel that they haven't really read about something if they've read only one text on the topic. We want them to actively seek out varied perspectives—to be dissatisfied with limited knowledge. We are educating them not for that state test, nor for that college class, but for the contributions they'll make to this world.

You may wonder whether teaching readers to question is reading instruction. That's really what reading is, though: a constant, quiet questioning of the text, of the reader's response, and of the meanings that emerge in this interaction. Questioning also includes the ability to reflect, to revise thinking, and to remain open to new ideas. When we teach readers to come to the text with a questioning attitude, we are teaching them to develop not only close-reading practices, but also intellectual stances.

Constructing Arguments

Another method that leads students to read nonfiction more closely is positioning reading work as the work of weighing and evaluating evidence for arguments students are deeply engaged in. When students are invited to research and debate authentic

arguments—arguments about search and seizure, the legal drinking age, deployment of the atom bomb, nuclear energy, or whether the class should go to the zoo or the museum for the next field trip—they tend to research with a fierceness that you don't often see in school. You'll see them circling parts of articles, combing websites, replaying newscasts, and comparing and contrasting evidence.

Searching for the evidence that most clearly makes their point and that stirs up their audience is the real reading work here. Whether they are writing essays or letters, preparing speeches or panel presentations, or debating, teach students to be alert to juicy quotes—to notice when an author says something with such compelling language that they want to use his or her exact words. As they hone their own arguments, teach them to compare how authors use facts and statistics, and how they use stories as examples and also to stir up sympathy. Teach them to read closely for evidence and also for parts of the text where the author might serve as a mentor.

When students are composing compelling arguments, they have reasons to go back to the texts, to glean every possible detail that might be important, to compare sources, and to align with or reject points of view. They also have reasons to consider the other side so that they can better defend their own. They become more alert to detail and perspective in their reading. When you teach research-based argument, you teach students “what it means to be a citizen in a participatory democracy . . . to become discriminating and credible, influential, and engaged” (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Taranto, 2013).

Opportunities for Self-Directed Reading

A cautionary note: Keep in mind that you want to set kids up to work on their reading by doing a lot of reading.

Video Bonus

For more on how students can use informational text to construct arguments, watch the interview with Steve Stein of the Boston Debate League at www.ascd.org/el1113stein.

The goal of this reading work is not to produce kids who spend hours on a single page of text, poring over the language at the wordsmith level like post-graduate students in literary theory. They could end up like an athlete who spends a lot of time thinking about running but rarely runs.

After all, the goal of reading nonfiction is to learn, and the best way to do that is to read a lot. Allington's research (2012) shows that to grow as readers, kids need protected time to read, access to books they find fascinating, and expert instruction. So if your “expert instruction” slows down students' practices initially as you coach them to sharpen their vision, you'll want to then let them loose on lots of fresh texts. With experience, readers do begin to naturally see more as they read—just as that experienced reader of baseball naturally notices a lot during the game, because he or she is alert to what there is to pay attention to.

Transforming Reading Practices in a School

Finally, if you want to get this work going with students, you might want to start with the adults in the building. Choose a text you'll find engaging, and try out these close-reading practices together. You're much more likely, then, to get more transference across the curriculum, including more opportunities for students to practice this work. You're also likely to change the discourse around close reading, so that it becomes a discourse of hard work and beauty. For you are not setting out

to tinker with kids' reading skills, adding a strategy here or there. You are setting out to transform their ideas about what it means to read. ■

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Mary Ehrenworth (maryehrenworth@post.harvard.edu) is deputy director of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, Columbia University, New York.