

Close Reading Concept Paper: The purpose of this paper is to define KIPP’s point of view on close reading. For guidance on planning and executing close reading lessons, consult KIPP’s Close Reading Evidence Guide and Planning Guide.

The Data that Matters

350 Lexile Levels. 4 Years of Growth. That’s the difference between the average reading level of late high school texts and early college texts. Over the past 30 years, the readability levels of texts in grades 3-12 have trended downward in difficulty, while the readability of college level texts have trended upward¹. This means that our graduating seniors would have to make 4 years’ worth of reading growth in order to be ready to read the average college-level text.

70%. What kind of effect does this have when students get to college? Not surprisingly, it’s really significant. According to ACT’s study, *Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals About College Readiness in Reading*, 70% of postsecondary college students who enroll in remedial reading courses do not attain a college degree.²

To and Through College. Given these statistics, fulfilling our promise to get students to and through college means working strategically to close this literacy gap. When our students get to college, they need to be able to effectively read, analyze, interpret, and evaluate complex texts *independently* without the assistance of a teacher.

So, Why Close Reading?

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.³ When close reading is a routine practice in elementary, middle, and high school, students build the skills and stamina they need to confidently and successfully meet the literacy demands of college.

What is Close Reading?

Close reading is a strategy for making meaning of complex texts through four critical phases of understanding: literal, analytical, conceptual, and evaluative. All of these phases serve in supporting students’ discovery of the text’s implicit messages, overall significance, and mastery of the CCSS Reading Anchor standards.

¹ Liben, David: “Why Complex Text Matters.” *Aspects of Text Complexity Project*. 2010. Print.

² ACT, Inc. *Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals About College Readiness in Reading*. 2006. Print.

³ Liben.

	Phase of Understanding*	Questions Answered	Students...
Within The Text	Literal	What kind of text is this? What does the text sound like? What does the text say?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mentally vocalize, read aloud, listen to fluent reading Retell, paraphrase explicit meaning Describe the text (what kind of text is this? How is it organized?)
	Analytical	How does the text express itself? What is implied? What does it mean?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyze author's craft: structure, rhetoric and/or literary devices Analyze the interrelationships and details of informational content. Determine implicit meaning of key phrases and sections of text
	Conceptual	What does the whole text mean? What is the text's overall message?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Synthesize key understandings to determine central ideas or themes and how they interrelate. Determine author's purpose, point of view
Beyond the Text	Evaluative	What is the significance of the text? Why does this text matter?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connect understandings of the text to a larger body of knowledge or to other texts

**Although these phases represent the general progression of understanding, throughout the reading process, there is an inter-play among these phases. For instance, a reader may need to infer (analytical phase) as s/he develops literal understanding, or a reader's understanding of a text's overall meaning (conceptual) may lead them to go back and do a deeper analysis.*

As a foundation, students need a literal comprehension of the text. This involves being able to mentally vocalize the words on the page, to state what the text says explicitly, and to identify basic features of the text's genre. Teachers aid students' literal understanding of the text by asking basic comprehension questions (*Who is the main character? What is her job? Where does she live? What is she doing in the first paragraph?*) or prompting students to paraphrase sections of the text individually or in groups. If the text includes many unfamiliar words, the teacher should read the text aloud for fluency before beginning the literal understanding phase.

It is only when students have firm literal understanding of the text that they can deepen their understanding through the analytical and conceptual phases. This means that the teacher should not move forward until this understanding is achieved class-wide. During the analytical phase, students analyze the elements of author's craft or the interrelationships of informational content to determine implicit messages of specific sections of text. A teacher facilitates this by asking text-dependent questions that help to reveal these understandings (*What is the metaphor used in this section? What is the author communicating about the character by using this metaphor? How is the author's argument structured? How does this structure impact meaning?*).

In K-2, students respond to these questions orally or through graphics, and in grades 3-12, these questions are best answered through independent writing so that the teacher has documentation of individual student progress.

The third phase of the process, the conceptual phase, focuses on the text's overall message – the author's purpose, point of view, or the text's central idea or theme. Students re-read key sections of the text and responses to previous text dependent questions to develop a conceptual, or whole, understanding of the text. They compose a written response to a culminating question – one that requires students to synthesize their knowledge of the text and infer an overall message. Teachers generate these questions, thoughtfully incorporating the key ideas from important sections. *(How does the author's use of figurative language reinforce the theme of the text? How do rhetorical devices impact the central idea?)*

Students move beyond the text in the final phase, the evaluative phase, to evaluate the text's overall significance. This helps students contextualize what they are learning by integrating their prior knowledge, other texts they have read, or a larger body of knowledge within the particular discipline. Teachers generate additional questions during this phase in an effort to get students to connect the ideas of the text with the outside world. *(How does this author's point of view on this topic compare to others'? How important is this point of view in the discipline?)*

Enabling Systems

Close reading is a critical component of elementary, middle, and high school literacy programs. In K-8, close reading works in conjunction with guided reading, independent reading, and vocabulary instruction, and in high school, close reading begins to play a more significant role in the content areas, particularly in text-heavy courses like science and history. For close reading to be integrated effectively into our school's instructional programs, the following enabling systems need to be in place:

- **School schedules need to build in sufficient time for close reading in addition to the other elements of balanced literacy. This will require approximately 4 hours of literacy instruction per day.** In elementary and middle school, we recommend that teachers conduct close reading lessons for 45 minutes, 3-4 times per week during the main ELA block. In high school, students should be practicing close reading for at least 45 minutes each day across the content areas. *Refer to the [K-8 Literacy blueprint](#) for specific recommendations about other core literacy practices involved in these 4 hours of instruction.*
- **Schools budgets should prioritize the purchase of texts that meet the CCSS demands.** The CCSS has new standards for text complexity, and schools should have adequate funds to purchase the texts that meet these new standards. These texts should not only meet the quantitative and qualitative measures outlined in the CCSS, but they should also be culturally relevant, engage the unique interests of students, and teach students important knowledge about the world. In addition, close reading, which is a form of shared reading, requires all students to be able to access the same text at the same time, so full class sets of shared texts are required.
- **Teachers need to be excellent close readers themselves.** Having a deep and thorough understanding of complex texts is essential for planning and executing successful close reading lessons. Teachers need training on text selection, and how to closely read texts in their content areas, and they need time to discuss and debrief important sections of texts with colleagues.
- **Teachers need at a minimum of 1-2 opportunities each week (and ideally 3-4) with colleagues to plan collaboratively and to look at student work (LASW) in content teams.** Close reading instruction, and student achievement, are most likely to show continuous improvement if teachers have the opportunity to collaborate regularly, engaging in a consistent cycle of lesson tuning and careful analysis of the resulting student work.