

## Ensuring Student Success with Complex Text

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*“Few topics have stirred more debate in the literacy community than that of how to ensure student success with complex texts.”*

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## Introduction

One of the most daunting challenges confronting educators today, with the heightened emphasis on college and career readiness, is how to ensure that all students become expert at the close reading of complex texts. In fact, few topics have stirred more debate in the literacy community than this. Some suggest that too much focus on close reading (Bressler, 2007) harkens back to the era of New Criticism—an era in which the meaning of a text may have too readily been found within its four corners, in isolation of any outside context (Beers & Probst, 2013; Smith, Appleman, & Wilhelm, 2014). Others contend that literacy educators have been too quick to neglect the importance of the cognitive challenge that comes along with close, careful, and analytic reading of complex texts, and that they have instead overemphasized the way students’ personal connections and thinking strategies intersect with texts (Boyles, 2012/2013). All the while, calls for higher standards continue to echo across the country. For example, the CCSS outline expectations and a rationale for raising standards in order to equip a generation of students to be college and career ready:

Students who meet the Standards readily undertake the close, attentive, reading that is at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex works of literature. They habitually perform the critical reading necessary to pick carefully through the staggering amount of information available today in print and digitally. They actively seek the wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens world views. They reflexively demonstrate the cogent reasoning and use of evidence essential to both private deliberation and responsible citizenship in a democratic republic. (CCSSO/NGA, 2010, p. 3)

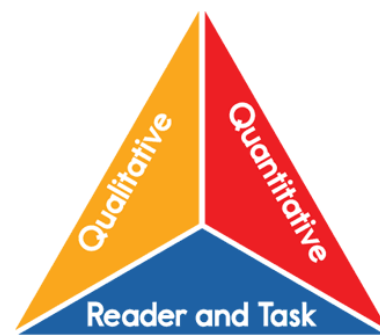
## Obstacles and Challenges

The CCSS, as well as state standards, link being able to independently and proficiently read complex text with students' high achievement in college and eventual success in the workplace. In outlining how to approach complex text, the Standards borrow from a plethora of literacy research and employ a three-part model that includes (1) qualitative dimensions of text complexity, (2) quantitative dimensions of text complexity, and (3) reader and task considerations (p. 4).

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*"In the rush to engage students, there is often little time left for eyes on the actual text."*

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*The Standards Model of Text Complexity*

While these three dimensions are described in detail, they may underemphasize the critical nature of the relationship between reading engagement and student success (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000) and the role that teacher modeling and scaffolding play in student success (Frey & Fisher, 2013). These two aspects, then, become important considerations for educators as they respond to the conundrum and challenges inherent in implementing the standards.

Another major point of contention centers on the reader's role in creating meaning. Some scholars worry that in our effort to focus students as they undertake close, attentive reading, we may fail to create a sense of balance and centeredness on both the reader and the text. Rosenblatt (1978) offers a useful theory: a continuum that places "aesthetic" reading (a lived-through, emotional experience) on one end and "efferent" reading (a focus on the "residue" left after reading) on the other. She suggests that readers can produce both in reading a text, though maintains that the text must always remain a constraint in a reader's creation of meaning. Yet another dilemma for teachers is found in what Fisher and Frey (2013) describe as "a rush to engage students" (p. 14) in analyzing, making judgments, synthesizing across multiple sources of information, formulating opinions, and creating new products, such that there is often little time left for eyes on the actual text.

## Addressing the Obstacles and Challenges: A Bold Approach

While educators must grapple with all the demands of implementation, students' readiness for close reading of complex texts varies dramatically. Thus educators must identify an approach that honors both the rigorous expectations of current standards and the unique needs of individual students. In *Rigorous Reading: 5 Access Points for Comprehending Complex Texts*, Frey and Fisher outline a highly successful approach that employs five access points grounded in the shared responsibility that exists in the classroom between teachers and students (e.g., Fisher & Frey, 2008; Pearson & Fielding, 1991). A rich body of literacy research supports their five access points: Access Point One: Purpose and Modeling; Access Point Two: Close and Scaffolded Reading Instruction; Access Point Three: Collaborative Conversations; Access Point Four: An Independent Reading Staircase; and Access Point Five: Demonstrating Understanding and Assessing Performance (Frey & Fisher, 2013). P. David Pearson calls this approach "both balanced and centered" (Frey & Fisher, 2013, p. xv). Fisher and Frey describe further how to extend and deepen this model through questioning in their pair of volumes, *Text-Dependent Questions: Pathways to Close and Critical Reading*, Grades K–5, and Grades 6–12.

### Access Point One: Purpose and Modeling

**Modeling.** The educational community has long understood the efficacy and importance of teacher modeling and demonstration (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). This practice, based upon the Vygotskian notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (1978), provides explicit and intentional steps or strategies necessary to reach a desired outcome. The practice of modeling in close reading of complex text is particularly important. Students often approach reading in a generic way with little appreciation for the how readers struggle with meaning and tolerate ambiguity within the reading process. Modeling often takes the form of think aloud (Davey, 1983), which makes visible the "in the head" thinking. Of particular importance in this era of the CCSS, Frey and Fisher (2013) suggest five specific reasons for modeling, which are outlined below. Modeling these strategies or "habits of active readers when confronted with challenging texts" (Frey and Fisher, 2013, p. 27) equips students with the necessary tools to comprehend complex reading.

*Accessing Complex Text Through Teacher Modeling*. Frey and Fisher's Five Principles of Modeling are as follows:

1. **Anticipate areas that may prove difficult for students.** Once identified, the teacher makes thinking about these potential text challenges transparent for students—through modeling—to show how a reader engages with text to get to the place of full comprehension.
2. **Demonstrate ways readers resolve problems and confusion about text and unknown words, and showing the methods they use to monitor their understanding in order to make adjustments.** This troubleshooting ability is an important attribute proficient readers possess (Duke & Pearson, 2002).
3. **Demonstrate for students how readers interact with text and how they hold their thinking during the reading process.** The teacher demonstrates how actions such as underlining, making marginal notes, circling, and so on enhance understanding. Keene and Zimmermann (1997) refer to these as text management strategies. Closely watching another reader explicitly share the practice and purpose of such annotations ensures students understand their function as part of engaged readers' repertoire. These annotations—either written directly on the text or on Post-Its—also serve as a support for collaborative discussion.
4. **Model exactly how a skill, strategy, or concept is used through think aloud.** The teacher demonstrates by highlighting three types of knowledge: declarative (naming the skill or strategy), procedural (demonstrating how to use the skill or strategy), and conditional knowledge (stating when and why the strategy or skill is used) (Paris, Lipson, & Wixson, 1983). Too often instruction includes only declarative knowledge and students are left to fill in the "how" and "why" of the selected skill.
5. **Incorporate the powerful instructional routine of interactive shared reading.** Using an enlarged copy of the text (Holdaway, 1979) for young students and individual copies for older ones, the teacher models and engages the students in reading and in a lively discussion of the text, providing necessary scaffolding and questioning to produce an understanding of the text. Peer interactions are key components of shared reading. Teachers encourage student participation rather than default to the most common classroom discourse pattern of IRE (teacher *I*nitiates; student *R*esponds; teacher *E*valuates). IRE creates an imbalance of power in which students' contributions are marginalized in the meaning-making process (Cazden, 1988). Frey and Fisher (2013) advocate strongly for students to be active participants in discussing the text.

**Purpose.** Frey and Fisher (2013) contend that every successful lesson has a purpose, goal, or objective that is clearly articulated so that students understand why the learning is important and where that knowledge fits in the performance or reading. Perhaps the most important consideration in crafting a purpose statement is how to articulate it in such a way that students understand precisely what they are to learn. To prepare clear purpose statements, teachers are tasked with analyzing standards and identifying the end performance desired. Both the language and content of the purpose statement are of utmost importance because students must know and understand why and how a lesson will unfold. Ausubel (1978) posited that advance organizers help learners activate what they already know and facilitate connecting new information to known information. The purpose statement works similarly in focusing student attention and anticipating the learning outcomes. Purpose-setting creates an anchor, influencing not only the reader's comprehension and engagement with text (Ruddell & Unrau, 2014). Further, the purpose "helps the teacher and the students return once again to the intended focus of the lesson" (Frey & Fisher, 2013, p. 41).

#### **Access Point Two: Close and Scaffolded Reading Instruction**

One important principle in teaching is that when complexity increases, so must teacher scaffolding and support (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). Vygotsky's (1978) theory of optimal instruction—the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)—is useful in planning close reading lessons for students. In identifying the precise area where instruction is most helpful to students, the teacher plans scaffolding to support learners. The teacher's attention to removing scaffolds is equally important as students gain expertise and grow in independence (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). The teacher's role shifts from a high level of support to observation and refinement through this gradual release of responsibility until students become independent at a particular task.

Figure 1: Zone of Proximal Development and Teacher Scaffolding

Zone of Actual or Current Development	Zone of Proximal Development	Zone of Future Development
No Scaffolding Needed	Initial Scaffolding Required <i>but</i> Decreasing Over Time	Area Out of Learner's Current Development Reach

In tackling complex texts, readers must attend to levels of detail within a text not typically pursued in more casual reading (Richards, 1929). This attention to detail ideally occurs as students read short, high-quality texts (International Reading Association CCSS Committee, 2012) and focus their attention on noting authorial elements of purpose, craft, and meaning. With this in mind, students read and reread selected text purposefully and effortfully several times to gain understanding—a practice used by proficient readers (Blau, 2003). One common classroom practice subject to recent criticism has to do with the amount of supportive background or frontloading a teacher may do prior to students' reading, which may devolve into a summary of the piece. In close reading, Frey and Fisher demonstrate that setting a new purpose prior to each rereading helps focus the reader and increases active engagement with the text. This is unlike preteaching the *content*; here, the teacher sets a purpose that aids the reader, who then works individually and collaboratively to discover the author's meaning in both fictional and informational text.

Followed by discussion and text-dependent questions, students delve back into the text to gain insight and evidence to support their answers. While the use of text-dependent questions does not preclude readers' making personal connections, the intent is for readers to make the text the primary evidentiary source for answering questions. Stahl (2014) suggests it is necessary to teach explicitly what counts as evidence within and across the disciplines. Teachers structure text-dependent questions in at least six ways so that they address the following: general understanding; key details; vocabulary and text structure; author's purpose; inferences; and opinions, arguments, and intertextual connections (Frey & Fisher, 2013). While the teacher takes the initial lead, research by Yopp (1988) indicates that when students generate questions, their comprehension is enhanced. Thus, if teachers are routinely modeling questions that demand complex thinking, there is an increased likelihood that students will form their own such questions in the future. This is the ultimate goal of Fisher and Frey's work with text-dependent questions: student independence.

Support for reading complex texts may take several forms, depending on students' needs for support. First and foremost, it is the student, not the teacher, who is the reader. Though scaffolding may be necessary for success, the reader must orchestrate the various demands necessary to comprehend and appreciate the complexities within text (Duke & Pearson, 2002). Small-group instruction is often used to differentiate instruction for students in need of additional support (Robertson, Dougherty, Ford-Connors, & Paratore, 2014). Key considerations include the long-proven practices of grouping students with similar strengths and needs, adhering to dynamic, flexible groupings that change based on students' strengths and needs, and using prompts sensitive to the moment-to-moment demands for the reader within the performance of reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). When carefully planning close reading instruction as outlined by Fisher and Frey (2012) and providing ample and appropriately designed scaffolding, teachers create the conditions for students to develop the "necessary habits of readers when they engage with a complex piece of text" (p. 179).

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**Access Point Three: Collaborative Conversations**

Learning is inherently social, and language serves as tool for learning, building an understanding of literate concepts and practices (Johnston, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978). In addition to serving as a context for learning, students' conversations offer teachers rich formative data and provide valuable insights into learners' understandings. As students engage in discussion, teachers note their conversational moves and the flow of conversation (Fisher & Frey, 2015a). These data become key in planning next instructional steps. While research is clear about how important the role of talk is in learning, this role takes on elevated importance for students learning how to access complex text. Since discourse patterns are learned, the teacher plays a key role in modeling and scaffolding conversation. Vygotsky's (1978) notion that "children grow into the intellectual life around them" (p. 88) illustrates the importance of designing tasks in which learners use language to work together to arrive at sophisticated understandings. In doing so, students must know how to use the academic language associated with both the content and the discipline. Frey and Fisher (2013) suggest using sentence frames to help students craft productive and thoughtful discourse patterns to encourage the dialogic nature of conversation in which all participants assume an inquiry stance (Fisher & Frey, 2015a, 2015b). They urge that attention be paid to designing group tasks, (specifically to the ways in which teachers group students), explicit expectations around conversation and group work, and the expectations around the products students produce as artifacts of their work. With well-designed opportunities for collaboration and an emphasis on teacher modeling and support, students grow into increasingly greater expertise and independence (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). "Over time, [students] they assume increased responsibility for their discussions about complex texts" (Fisher & Frey, 2015a, p. 23).

**Access Point Four: Independent Reading Staircase**

Educators who design teaching and learning around the gradual release of responsibility afford readers time to apply new learning within the performance of reading. Ehrenworth (2013) and Smith, Wilhelm and Appleman (2014) suggest teachers need to develop structures for transference so that learners see application beyond a single reading of a single text. To do so, Erhenworth advocates for students to have the opportunity for "repeated practice on a variety of texts, with calibrated feedback along the way" (p. 18). Allington and Gabriel (2012) also note that exemplary teachers make more time for authentic reading, which, in turn, develops better readers. In increasing time for independent reading, Frey and Fisher (2013) offer six guidelines: (1) clear learning goals, (2) texts that relate to students' personal experiences, (3) support from the teacher in making choices, (4) texts with interesting topics, (5) instruction in reading strategies, and (6) opportunities to collaborate with other students. They note that these differ somewhat from the guidelines around typical sustained silent reading (SSR) in that the teacher takes a more active role in supporting students in selecting increasingly more complex texts. As students read independently, teachers also create opportunities for conferring. These conferences play a key role in supporting students' ongoing development and offer windows into students' strengths and needs. Within the conference format, teachers can offer short, focused "lessons" that address each reader's unique and immediate needs.

**Access Point Five: Demonstrating Understanding and Assessing Performance**

Frey and Fisher (2013) caution that accessing complex text requires more than just making personal connections to it, which is something that has too often served as a proxy for deep comprehension. They present four ways in which teachers can build student success and refocus attention on the text:

1. model before you expect;
2. pose questions that require students to return to the text;
3. ask students to provide evidence to support their opinions and ideas; and
4. require students to write rhetorically.

There are a wide range of close reading tasks that send students back into texts to delve below surface ideas and details. For example, writing tasks that invite students to respond to teacher-created prompts—prompts that have specifically been designed in such a way that students must return to the text for evidence and authorial insights—fall into this category. Other text-dependent tasks include Socratic Seminars and class debates. Both hold students accountable for the text and require students to use the text to discuss ideas, argue for or against an issue, and present and defend ideas.

Teachers must find ways to embed rich formative assessments to gain insights into students' learning. This requires that teachers detect patterns across students to check for confusions and misunderstandings in order to plan future instruction. P. David Pearson (2014) advocates renaming formative assessment *responsive teaching*. This shift in wording alludes to the goal of all good teaching: student success. Furthermore, carefully embedding these continuous checks for understanding is critical to helping students achieve "college and career readiness" and to helping create young people who "actively seek the wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens world views" (CCSSO/NGA, 2010, p. 3).



## Text-Dependent Questions: A Cognitive Pathway Through Text

The access points found in *Rigorous Reading* (Frey & Fisher, 2013) offer teachers a research-based approach to instructional planning that is carefully designed to scaffold and support readers as they gain and grow in their expertise in the close reading of complex texts. As teachers support students through the practices outlined in the previous section, our attention turns to the need to prepare text-dependent questions that serve as a scaffold for readers as they learn to grapple with aspects of text “that are challenging or confusing” (Fisher & Frey, 2015a, 4). Classroom discussion plays a key role not only in the construction of knowledge, but it also fosters students’ engagement and willingness to go beyond telling *about* text to the deep and thoughtful analysis *of* text. Researchers have long noted the power of dialogic teaching (see Wilkerson & Son, 2011). Fisher and Frey (2015b, p. 27) identify three facets to distinguish this type of robust dialogue from other types of classroom talk.

1. Sustained dialogue, not just short questioning cycles
2. Uptake, such that the teacher poses new questions **derived** from the comments of students
3. Authentic questions that do not always have a single correct answer

To scaffold for this kind of critical thinking, Fisher and Frey (2015a, 2015b) offer a clear and linear pathway to question development in their four phases of close reading, organized around the cognitive levels in the Depth of Knowledge (DOK) framework developed by Webb (2002).

The practice and use of close reading begins with a reader’s foundational understanding of the literal level of text, moving the student to a more thorough and deeper exploration into a text’s meaning. The phases, outlined by Fisher and Frey (2015a, 2015b) and drawn from the work of reading researchers, are intended to unfold over several lessons. Fisher and Frey offer cautionary note for teachers to avoid viewing the phases as a recipe for reading. These phases work within a context of rich discussion and attention to the necessary scaffolding students may require to grow as engaged, meaning-seeking readers. A brief discussion of each of the four phases follows.

### Phase I: What Does the Text Say?

In this phase, questions focus readers’ attention to major points in the text such as plot and sequence, key characters, and main ideas and their supporting details. These questions, along with connected lines of inquiry, ensure students form general understandings of text. Fisher and Frey (2015b) note that while it may be tempting for the teacher to reveal key ideas, the teacher will find it prudent to assume a partnership role in which teacher and students coauthor this understanding to build on in the next phases.

## Phase 2: How Does the Text Work?

Phase 2 questions serve a key role as a bridge to the next phase: what the text means. These questions, analytic in nature, parse and probe the parts of text to understand the text as a whole. This phase is importantly placed following the first in which the reader creates a “whole.” Studies demonstrate that an understanding of the structural elements of text affect understanding of the text as a whole (Pressley, 2002). Insights and understanding about text structure, whether expository or literary, and their respective features play an important role in students’ comprehension. In addition, scaffolding readers in noticing the author’s intentional decisions about word choice and craft elements (i.e., mood, tone, sentence variety, and text features) contribute to the reader’s comprehension. Shifting readers’ focus “to reading like a writer” strengthens their understanding of both meaning and how texts are built. After focusing on these foundational aspects of Phases 1 and 2, the teacher transitions the reader to the next phase.

## Phase 3: What Does the Text Mean?

The focus of this phase is about supporting readers as they gain an understanding of a text by making inferences. Inferring forces a reader to go beyond the literal meaning, arriving at meanings supported by text evidence but not explicitly stated in the text. Some researchers have called inferring the art of “gap filling.” Readers infer an authors’ purpose, their point of view, the decision to use a particular text structure or forma and also make inferences about intertextual connections, an understanding of how both print and media texts compare and contrast within and across genres and platforms. Skilled readers grow increasingly more sophisticated networks or constellations that offer them rich reservoirs to access.

## Phase 4: What Does the Text Inspire You to Do?

The previous three phases outline the journey readers undertake to developing the habits of a close, careful, and engaged reader. These phases unfold in linearly, but readers crisscross them recursively to reach a destination. In this final phase, readers take some kind of action that has been inspired by learning something new. These text-dependent tasks take a number of different forms. Readers may be inspired to give presentation in which they develop both the content and their presentation skills. They may craft their response to text in written form, selecting an appropriate purpose and mode. Text-dependent tasks often include research opportunities that strengthen both the spoken and written products. Classroom debates offer another possibility for students to showcase their understandings gleaned in close and careful reading. To further tap students’ comprehension, teachers create summative assessments, developing questions that require textual evidence and synthesis of key ideas.

The process outlined in this paper provides an important focus that informs teachers’ planning and results in students’ growth as readers. Fisher and Frey incorporate a wide range of reading research with attention to best practices in the access points and the phases for creating high-quality text-dependent questions. These access points and phases will guide educators as they develop thoughtful and engaged readers, capable of crafting their own questions themselves.

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## Fisher & Frey's PD Resource Center for Close & Critical Reading

Frey and Fisher have developed a rich array of pedagogical tools to address the expectations and rigorous demands that accompany this era of high standards and the need to prepare students to be college and career ready. The research, however, is clear that to be effective and positively influence student learning and achievement, ongoing professional learning is essential. Fullan (2010) identifies this as the hardest leadership challenge of all: “build[ing] in learning for improvement day after day in your own organization” (p. 53). In fact, both Fullan and Elmore (2004) along with other researchers note that there is almost no time in school for teachers to engage in continuous and sustainable learning within the setting in which they work.

Enter Fisher and Frey's PD Resource Center for Close and Critical Reading. The array of professional learning resources available through the Center greatly increases the potential for ongoing capacity building and sustainability within a school community. The rich variety of focused resources stand ready to address whole-staff needs, support individual teacher development, and enact the necessary change practices to address increasing student reading standards—all within the constraints of administrators' and teachers' busy schedules. Specifically, this platform has been designed in such a way that both facilitators of professional development and teacher participant cohorts have flexible access to ready-to-use professional learning materials that walk users through the five access points and the four cognitive pathways to comprehending complex text that Fisher and Frey describe in detail in *Text Dependent Questions: Pathways to Close and Critical Reading*. Facilitators are provided with Professional Learning Guides and accompanying PowerPoint slides to guide participants, while participants have relevant handouts, videos, sample student work, assessment protocols, and more, all at their fingertips to pull from as time allows. Teachers are provided multiple supports and scaffolds as they read, view, collaborate, discuss, and attempt step-by-step implementation and assessment in an ongoing way over the course of a semester or entire school year.

Knight (2011) advocates for a partnership approach in which teachers' voices and ideas matter, noting that creating a learning organization is the goal—not compliance. Just as modeling and demonstrating make enormous differences in student learning, they also pay huge dividends when applied to teachers. For these reasons among others the video clips provided in the Resource Center are invaluable, because they provide teachers a window into what the five access points and quality text dependent questioning truly look like in practice and, in turn, equip them with the knowhow to model the practices in their own classrooms and school communities.

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*“Researchers have found that teachers need at least fourteen hours of intensive PD to implement new practices.”*

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While many professional development programs may introduce teachers to new ideas about content and pedagogy, “what really counts is what happens *in between workshops*” (Fullan, 2010, p. 53). Research tells us “the kind of high-intensity, job-embedded collaborative learning that is most effective is not a common feature of professional development across most states, districts, and schools in the United States” (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009, p. 4). Researchers’ findings that teachers need at least 14 hours of intensive, focused professional development to implement new practices is noteworthy. Further, studies show that the combination of professional development, practice, and coaching combine to ensure new strategies are “mastered and implemented in class” (French, 1997, as cited in Gulamhussein, 2013). The PD Resource Center gives schools and districts the luxury to provide yearlong flexible, ongoing, embedded professional development such that teachers are learning *as they continue their day-to-day practice* and not in an isolated, one-off workshop setting.

The task before literacy educators is daunting if we attempt to rely solely on standards documents to solve our problems. Fisher and Frey’s PD Resource Center for Close and Critical Reading provides a clear and thoughtful pathway for teachers to lead students “to read complex text independently and proficiently” (CCSS, Appendix A, p. 4). Rigorous standards and high expectations have the potential to ensure all students are college and career ready only if educators possess the instructional expertise to support the diverse learners in today’s classrooms.

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