

Simply stated, close reading means uncovering layers of meaning in a text. In many respects, effective K–2 teachers have always engaged in the actions and outcomes of this practice, using conceptually rich, compelling fiction and nonfiction as the centerpiece of guiding students to read text and pictures well. So what’s different now? Well, to borrow from that famous ad, “This is not your mama’s K–2 reading!” We’ve amped it up, and some of the literacy field’s authors have helped describe it in a manner that is replicable in classrooms (Boyles, 2014; Fisher & Frey, 2013; Shanahan, 2012).

Close reading is one of those hot “trendy” topics in education that actually deserves a permanent place in K–12 classroom practice because, when implemented well, it really does help students to read and think analytically. In the intermediate and upper elementary grades and in secondary education, close reading has been widely embraced as a protocol that will help more students read more challenging texts, and the hope is that this will enable high school seniors entering college or the work force to be better prepared for the demands of 21st century careers. As you look out at your class of kindergarten, first, and second graders, who are still mastering the art of sitting still on the rug during read aloud, it’s hard to fathom that *how* you teach reading has a ripple effect on the reading proficiency of college seniors, but it does. That is, if we educators can use close reading as a cohesive, coherent practice K–12, it will actually make our teaching lives easier, and it will create a nation of readers, something we’ve been dreaming about for quite some time.

The question when working with K–2 students is not why but *how*? How will we start them on this path to close reading? Six- and seven-year-olds are generally not yet in a position to read complex texts on their own, or to annotate what they read like students in the upper elementary grades and beyond, or to process abstract thoughts without guidance. It’s all in the approach. So let’s think about exactly how we can make close reading happen in the primary grades using these six basic guidelines to get started:

1. Rely on high-quality picture books that you read aloud.
2. Teach an initial close reading lesson to build content knowledge.
3. Teach close reading follow-up lessons to build skills.
4. Assess close reading appropriately with formative assessments.

5. Teach close reading through units so students can make connections between texts.
6. Teach close reading through learning pathways that show students *how* to learn.



Courtesy of Rick Harrington Photography

In short, this book, *Lessons and Units for Closer Reading, Grades K–2*, and its companion volume for Grades 3–6, are the “how,” painted on a canvas of picture book units. I work with hundreds of teachers each year, and their most common request is *Give me a running start on close reading lessons and unit teaching. I don’t have time to figure out all the planning for this kind of teaching and to find all the great books that should be part of these units.* So these lessons and units were developed to save you days and days of planning time and to let you in on the trade secrets of success I’ve learned. One important difference in this K–2 volume is the bank of reproducible formative assessments (see page 18 for more on their use).

I made the Reader Response Frames and assessments a focal point of this K–2 book, in part because I realized the tremendous pressure on teachers to get students ready for the higher stakes assessments that begin in third grade. I also added them because I see how young learners love and often need these scaffolds as they begin their journey as readers, writers, and thinkers. Now let me walk you through each of these guidelines and explain how the lessons and units in this book support each one.

1. Rely on high-quality picture books that you read aloud.

By high-quality picture books, I don’t mean those really basic-level readers used for guided reading. As you’ve probably recognized yourself, there just isn’t enough content and ideas in them for kids to sink their teeth into during close reading. Instead, our go-to for close reading is picture books that offer plenty of qualitative complexity with thought-provoking themes, variation in structure, sophisticated language, and forays into corners of the world and times in history that inspire students to stretch their thinking along with their imagination. These books showcase the written word at its best, and they provide fabulous graphic support readers can use to make meaning.

Tips for Success

- Look for picture books with limited narrative. Too long a story or too much information will lead to more wiggles than learning with our youngest scholars. Remember that quantitative complexity, noted as Lexile in the Common Core, is not a consideration for primary grades, so you don’t need to factor this heavily into your text selection.

- For an initial close reading lesson with the whole class gathered around you, it is fine to have a single copy of a text. But in subsequent lessons when you want more interaction, it will be important to have multiple text copies, perhaps a book for every four or five students, so they can get up close and personal with everything a book has to offer.

How This Book Supports the Use of Picture Books

- Twenty high-quality picture books are the sources for all close reading lessons.
- The picture books represent a variety of cultures around the world and are both literary and informational; one is even a primary source.
- The picture books include plenty of strong female characters as well as strong males; both are engaged in problems and situations to which young students can relate.

2. Teach an initial close reading lesson to build content knowledge.

One of the hallmarks of close reading is that students have the opportunity to read a text once, and then read it (or parts of it) again, and perhaps even additional times if there are numerous complexities to explore. But to keep these repeated readings dynamic (rather than giving kids a feeling of *déjà vu!*), the initial close reading lesson and each of the planned follow-up lessons has to have a distinct purpose that you and your students are aware of.

Tips for Success

- As you prepare for and deliver an initial close reading, remember that your goal is twofold: to build students' understanding of the book's content and to get students ready to dig deeper when you return to the text with a more specific focus (for example, examining the author's point of view or elements of the text's structure).
- Remember that our ultimate goal is for students to read authentically, the way *we* read, appreciating how all parts of a text work together. Let these authentic motives drive the text-dependent questions you ask and the points you discuss, rather than allowing a reading strategy to "drive the bus." For instance, we don't pick up a book, a newspaper, or a magazine and say to ourselves, "I sure hope I can visualize today." No, instead, our reading is driven by the text, not by a particular "objective" that has been predetermined for us. We want students to read this way, too, to get as much from a text as they can the first time around. Indeed, we want them to read *closely* to experience the many wonderful facets of a text.

How This Book Supports the Teaching of Initial Close Reading Lessons

- Step-by-step plans are provided for all twenty initial close reading lessons.
- Lessons are designed for whole-class instruction and should take twenty to thirty minutes (depending on the developmental level of your students).
- The lessons are rigorous, requiring students to make careful observations about details and providing opportunities for deeper thinking.
- The lessons provide scaffolding *before* reading without overdoing the frontloading, *during* reading with thoughtful text-dependent questions, and *after* reading with tasks that help students reflect on meaning.
- The lessons provide guidelines for moving students toward independence in close reading in a way that is interactive and fun.

3. Teach close reading follow-up lessons to build skills.

Of course, there are limits to how much any of us can get from a text the first time around. Even for mature readers there may be particular complexities that confuse us, or perhaps we overlook nuances about a character or a theme. The need to go back to reread will be even greater for young children who are working hard to become skilled readers. So when we revisit texts, work on some of those comprehension skills.

Strong comprehension skill lessons will be explicit. That means we provide

- A clear **explanation** of the skill objective—what we will get better at doing today—and what we need to do to meet this objective
- Brief **modeling** of the process, with one or two examples so students can see firsthand how to engage in this process themselves
- Time for **guided practice** so students can try it out

Tips for Success

- Build in lots of opportunities for peer-to-peer practice so students don't feel quite so alone at the early stages of learning a new skill. Note that this takes more than telling kids to turn



Courtesy of Rick Harrington Photography

to a partner to talk. Without building a culture of collaboration, you don't get accountable talk; you get anarchy! You might need to practice the process of working with a partner with role-play scenarios: How can you invite a buddy to work with you if that person doesn't have a partner? How can you get your partner back on track if the conversation strays from today's task?

- To keep kids focused, I provide many sets of Active Reader Cards (see pages 25–88) that you can select for a specific purpose. For example, if students are working on story parts, you will want to use the Active Reader Cards for Summarizing. If you are working on retrieving evidence, you would choose the Active Reader Cards for Noticing Key Details. There are cards or charts for every comprehension skill in this book.

How This Book Supports Follow-Up Skill Lessons

- Two explicit skill lessons are provided for each text that include an explanation or review of the skill, teacher modeling, and guided practice for students.
- The lessons represent twelve critical comprehension skills aligned to Common Core expectations for students in the primary grades.
- All lessons are designed to be highly interactive, with the use of “props” to keep kids focused: Active Reader Cards and charts.
- Optional formative assessments are provided for each skill that can inform teachers' next steps in instruction. (See “Teaching and Assessing Students' Comprehension” on page 13 for much more information about these assessments.)

4. Assess close reading appropriately with formative assessments.

Assessing comprehension in the primary grades is a dilemma. Summative assessment (such as high-stakes state tests) don't work well. Children change so quickly in the primary grades that those scores become quickly outdated. Formative assessments make sense because they examine students' day-to-day performance and guide our next instructional steps. However, even using these can get complicated. For example, asking students to do an oral retell is not really an authentic reader task. (How often do *you* retell a book blow-by-blow?) And to make it worse, for some published assessments, the criteria for success deliver data that are questionable in their alignment to new standards. On the other hand, we don't want to thrust a pencil in students' hands too soon and expect them to write extensively about their reading. Trust me, the outcome here is not great answers, but a lot of crying kids!



So what's the solution? As a first-grade teacher of many years, I heartily endorse classroom discussion as a window into students' comprehension. Ask yourself: Who willingly responds when you pose questions? Are the responses accurate? Are they insightful? Can students elaborate on an answer with details from the text? Do they readily connect texts? These simple indicators are perhaps our best way to gauge students' developing comprehension competencies.

Tips for Success

- Be on the lookout for when your students are ready to move on to written response. Begin this transition when appropriate—probably mid-first grade. By mid-second grade nearly everyone should be on the road to writing about their reading.
- For written response without tears, consider providing some scaffolding to help students organize their thinking and to show them the kind of details that support different questions. The scaffolds in this book are Reader Response Frames that show

students how to begin their response and also the types of evidence to provide; different questions call for different types of evidence. Use the rubric included in this book to score these responses in order to obtain the information you need about who needs help with what.

How This Book Supports Formative Written Assessment

- For each of the twelve comprehension skills, there is a generic formative assessment that may be used following the skill lessons in this book or for any texts with which you teach these skills.
- Each assessment consists of a comprehension question aligned to the particular skill. For example, if the skill is identifying details that support a central idea, the question might be What is the central idea of this text? What details show this central idea? (Questions typically have two parts to reinforce the need for textual evidence.)
- All assessment questions build the skills students will need in later grades for Common Core assessments.

5. Teach close reading using units so students can make connections between texts.

Beware of random close reading lessons! It's easy enough to locate appropriately challenging texts, even for the primary grades, and to use them here and there to teach the kind of thinking required by close reading. But is that all we want our

close reading instruction to accomplish: building kids' capacity to think more deeply about text? We can aim higher! We can help our students become close readers so they can use this thinking to build for themselves a more complex knowledge base across diverse areas of study—for example, science topics like the solar system and engineering, historical periods and cultures around the world, and themes such as the meaning of compassion or trouble with friends.

Tips for Success

- Go within as well as across! Like doing a crossword puzzle, students' knowledge base and "aha!" moments expand when they make connections across the curriculum—while at the same time, they are working "down," reading complementary texts that help them gain the disciplinary knowledge needed for more complex, global understandings. To get this rolling, we first need texts that work together. These text sets make it easier to build units that bring coherence along with complexity. Teaching with units is ideal for the primary grades because students can see how things fit together and why. Four-week units provide the space and time for authentic text-to-text connections, and they drive out the lackluster instruction that may build skills but leaves young learners with a school experience that is a string of isolated experiences without high value, like a strand of fake pearls.
- Model, look for, and celebrate exemplary text-to-text connections so all students hear them and know what one is. For example, a student might say, "The first book we read about George Washington told us about his whole life. The second book is just about one part of his life, when he chopped down the cherry tree. The third book was about when he was president. Now I can see why he was a good president: because he was always honest, since he was a young person."

How This Book Supports Unit Teaching

- There are five units in this book, all centered on areas of study that will interest students at this developmental level.
- Completing each unit will take four to five weeks.
- Within each unit, students study four anchor texts and a related fable.
- There is a lesson specified at the end of each unit connecting all texts, and questions are provided to guide these connections.
- A Unit Curriculum Map offers an at-a-glance view of the whole unit—exactly which lesson to teach each day.

6. Teach close reading using learning pathways that show students *how to learn*.

Teaching units strengthens the impact of close reading. Teaching units as learning pathways is even more powerful. Here's what I mean: You and your



students could study a unit on dinosaurs, a perennial primary favorite. You would read books about various dinosaurs, and students would come to recognize the connection between these massive prehistoric creatures—which would build their dinosaur domain knowledge, a great start. But what if you added another layer to your unit study? What if you used this dinosaur unit to show students how to study *any* animal they want to investigate? This is what I call a learning pathway, and it is focused not on the content of a unit, but on the process of learning how to learn.

Tips for Success

- Alone or with colleagues, brainstorm all the learning pathways you might want to construct in the primary grades. For example, in this book I've addressed how to study about a person, an animal, a place, a theme, or a character trait. But this is just a beginning! You could design a learning pathway on a current issue or on something that resonates in your community or state.
- Framing your unit teaching in terms of learning pathways is the gift that keeps on giving. Here's why: The first time you study

an animal (or whatever) with your students, you begin to forge this pathway. The next time animal study comes up in a unit, or even in an individual text, students have a bit of a foundation on which to build—so your job is a little easier, and students are a lot more engaged. To get you thinking about the kinds of questions that could work over and over again across units, ask, “What are some questions we always need to answer when we’re studying an animal? How do we begin? What kinds of resources might help us?”

Just imagine the independent close reading we would see in our students if teachers of every grade worked together to build these pathways. Instead of a learning pathway, we'd have a learning superhighway. And by the end of high school, we'd most certainly have kids who are college and career ready. College may seem a long way off when we're teaching kindergarten or first or second grade. But close reading can support literacy right from the start. Close reading taught really, really well can help students achieve standards—and so much more!

How This Book Supports Learning Pathways

- Each unit provides access to a different learning pathway: How to study a character trait, an animal, a person, a place, and a theme.
- Each pathway is introduced during a unit preview lesson that gets students thinking about what it means to study this particular pathway; questions are provided.
- The final lesson for each anchor text brings students back to the learning pathway: examining the way this week’s text connects to the pathway.

Here are the pathways, units, and anchor texts included in this book.

Pathway	Unit Focus	Anchor Texts			
How to study a character trait	Why is it important to show kindness to others?	<i>Melissa Parkington’s Beautiful, Beautiful Hair</i> by Pat Brisson	<i>Mama Panya’s Pancakes: A Village Tale From Kenya</i> by Mary Chamberlin and Rich Chamberlin	<i>Each Kindness</i> by Jacqueline Woodson	<i>Ivan: The Remarkable True Story of the Shopping Mall Gorilla</i> by Katherine Applegate
How to study an animal	How are animals the same? How are animals different?	<i>Panda Kindergarten</i> by Joanne Ryder	<i>Antarctic Antics: A Book of Penguin Poems</i> by Judy Sierra	<i>Surprising Sharks</i> by Nicola Davies	<i>Turtle, Turtle, Watch Out!</i> by April Pulley Sayre
How to study a person	How do you make a difference—even if you’re a kid?	<i>Blizzard</i> by John Rocco	<i>The Wednesday Surprise</i> by Eve Bunting	<i>Rosie Revere, Engineer</i> by Andrea Beaty	<i>The Story of Ruby Bridges</i> by Robert Coles
How to study a place	What is special about this place?	<i>Antarctica</i> by Helen Cowcher	<i>Fernando’s Gift</i> by Douglas Keister	<i>Creatures of the Desert World</i> by Barbara Gibson and Jennifer Urquhart	<i>America the Beautiful: Together We Stand</i> by Katherine Lee Bates
How to study a theme	Why is it important to make good choices?	<i>Fireflies!</i> by Julie Brinckloe	<i>Those Shoes</i> by Maribeth Boelts	<i>Maddi’s Fridge</i> by Lois Brandt	<i>The Empty Pot</i> by Demi

Reflecting on the Six Guidelines

Before diving into the pathways, units, and lessons themselves, take the time to reflect on each of these six guidelines, asking yourself a related question to envision close reading in *your* primary grade classroom. Then read the following section on Teaching and Assessing Students' Comprehension. I think you'll like all the reproducibles that you can take back to your classroom right now.

Reflecting on the Guidelines For Close Reading in K-2

1. Rely on high-quality picture books that you read aloud.

A question to ask yourself: What makes this book "high quality"?

2. Teach an initial close reading lesson to build content knowledge.

A question to ask yourself: What are the complexities of this text?

3. Teach close reading follow-up lessons to build skills.

A question to ask yourself: Which comprehension skills are well-aligned with this text?

4. Assess close reading appropriately with formative assessments.

A question to ask yourself: How will I make sure students are *actively* engaged as readers and responders?

5. Teach close reading using units so students can make connections between texts.

A question to ask yourself: What books will work together to build students' critical thinking about an area of focus?

6. Teach close reading using learning pathways that show students *how* to learn.

A question to ask yourself: What pathways work for my grade, and how can they be part of a vertical alignment between grades?



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Teaching and Assessing Students' Comprehension

How do we assess the comprehension skills of primary grade students in a way that makes our teaching lives easier, not harder? What do formative assessments look like for young learners who are just getting their sea legs with literacy? What exactly are we trying to pinpoint in order for assessments to inform our daily instruction? The reality is that, when we look at all of our new reading standards (Common Core or other standards), panic sets in. Our minds race: *Where do I start? There are so many standards and these kids are so young, and are these rigorous expectations even developmentally appropriate?*

Here's what I can tell you that will ease your mind: Having spent a lot of time analyzing sample assessment items from PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) and SBAC (Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium), I have concluded that the hundreds of standards boil down to only about twelve comprehension concepts and skills at the early primary level. These dozen skills are the most central for K–2 children to learn; all that students will be expected to know and be able to do in the intermediate grades and beyond depend upon them.

So in this book, I focus instruction and assessment on just twelve comprehension skills and concepts that help students go the greatest distance when reading and responding to text in meaningful ways. And I firmly believe that if your students engage in the five units in this book, they will improve their readiness for the high-stakes assessments that begin in third grade. Does that make this book “test prep”? Not at all, because the test isn't driving the lessons; rich texts and ideas are. If I am guilty of having an agenda, it's to help teachers in the primary grades in turn help their students develop the habits and skills of proficient readers!

Specifically, by giving students regular opportunities to respond to authentic high-level questions about texts, we develop their ability to think strategically about *any* text's content and ideas, and just as important, we develop their abilities to communicate their understandings effectively. And yes, I believe that these twelve concepts and skills are developmentally on target. It's all in the scaffolding, in how we support different learners at different levels of development.

The Twelve Skills in Focus

I have organized the concepts and skills according to each comprehension anchor standard, technically identified by Common Core State Standards (CCSS) as the

College and Career Readiness Standards for Reading. That way, we will know we are providing our youngest learners with some of the bottom-line essentials to get their literacy thinking off the ground in each of the targeted comprehension areas.

Key Comprehension Skills and Concepts Aligned to Common Core State Standards

Standard 1 (Textual Evidence): Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

- Notice key details in a text

Standard 2 (Development of Ideas): Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

- Summarize a story
- Identify details that support a central idea

Standard 3 (Relationship Among Text Elements): Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

- Identify character traits and feelings
- Identify cause and effect

Standard 4 (Vocabulary): Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

- Identify important word meanings including the word, phrase, or sentence that provides the clue to understanding the word

Standard 5 (Text Structure and Features): Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.

- Identify the kind of information the author provides in this part of the text
- Identify the information that the text features provide

Standard 6 (Purpose and Point of View): Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

- Determine the author’s purpose for writing

Standard 7 (Different Text Formats): Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

- Interpret illustrations in a text

Standard 8 (Critical Thinking): Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

- Determine supporting evidence

Standard 9 (Text-to-Text Connections): Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

- Make text-to-text connections

How the Assessments Are Embedded Across Books and Units

If students are to become more proficient in their application of skills, they will need to practice and apply them over and over. Here are two chief ways I ensure your students get that practice:

- Guided by the complexities of each text, I have distributed the skills identified earlier over the twenty books included in the five units in this book.
- Every skill is represented at least three times, and there are even more lessons on the two skills that receive great emphasis on new standards-based high-stakes assessments: vocabulary and text-to-text connections.

The text-to-text connections required by the standards are especially ambitious because readers must integrate and synthesize multiple texts—quite a challenge for young children whose reasoning is still more concrete than abstract. So please recognize that most students won’t get anywhere near “mastery”; college students are still getting the hang of text-to-text analysis! Indeed, the best way to think about “meeting standards” is to remember that the described skill requirements *increase from grade to grade*, so what a child can do now will only graze the surface of what the same standard will demand later on.

That said, the five units in this book, and the rigorous yet child-centered instruction they represent, give you one great running start! Students will gain a solid foundation for *all* the areas comprehension they will further develop in later grades.

Distribution of Skill Assessments Across Books and Units

Standard and Skill	Books That Include Lessons on This Skill	Units That Include Lessons on This Skill
Identify key details in a text (Standard 1)	All books	All units
Summarize a story (Standard 2)	<i>The Empty Pot</i> <i>Melissa Parkington's Beautiful, Beautiful Hair</i> <i>Antarctic Antics: A Book of Penguin Poems</i>	How to Study a Theme How to Study a Character Trait How to Study an Animal
Identify details that support a central idea (Standard 2)	<i>Maddi's Fridge</i> <i>Rosie Revere, Engineer</i> <i>Each Kindness</i>	How to Study a Theme How to Study People How to Study a Character Trait
Identify character traits and feelings (Standard 3)	<i>Those Shoes</i> <i>The Wednesday Surprise</i> <i>Melissa Parkington's Beautiful, Beautiful Hair</i>	How to Study a Theme How to Study People How to Study a Character Trait
Identify cause and effect (Standard 3)	<i>Fireflies!</i> <i>The Story of Ruby Bridges</i> <i>Mama Panya's Pancakes: A Village Tale From Kenya</i>	How to Study a Theme How to Study People How to Study a Character Trait
Determine word meaning and clues to understanding (Standard 4)	<i>Those Shoes</i> <i>Rosie Revere, Engineer</i> <i>Creatures of the Desert World</i> <i>Surprising Sharks</i> <i>Antarctic Antics: A Book of Penguin Poems</i>	How to Study a Theme How to Study People How to Study a Place How to Study an Animal How to Study an Animal

Standard and Skill	Books That Include Lessons on This Skill	Units That Include Lessons on This Skill
Determine the kind of information the author provides in particular parts of the text (Standard 5)	<i>Fireflies!</i> <i>Antarctica</i> <i>Antarctic Antics: A Book of Penguin Poems</i>	How to Study a Theme How to Study a Place How to Study an Animal
Determine the information that the text feature provides (Standard 5)	<i>Blizzard</i> (speech bubbles) <i>Fernando's Gift</i> (close-up photographs) <i>Creatures of the Desert World</i> (tabs) <i>Surprising Sharks</i> (captions and labels)	How to Study People How to Study a Place How to Study a Place How to Study an Animal
Determine why the author wrote this story or informational article (Standard 6)	<i>Turtle, Turtle, Watch Out!</i> <i>The Wednesday Surprise</i> <i>Antarctica</i>	How to Study an Animal How to Study People How to Study a Place
Explain which part of a text is depicted by a particular illustration (Standard 7)	<i>Blizzard</i> <i>Maddi's Fridge</i> <i>Each Kindness</i> <i>Panda Kindergarten</i>	How to Study People How to Study a Theme How to Study a Character Trait How to Study an Animal
Determine whether a particular detail supports the central idea of the text, and why (Standard 8)	<i>Turtle, Turtle, Watch Out!</i> <i>Fernando's Gift</i> <i>Ivan, the Remarkable True Story of the Shopping Mall Gorilla</i>	How to Study an Animal How to Study a Place How to Study a Character Trait
Identify similarities and differences between texts (Standard 9)	<i>The Empty Pot</i> <i>The Story of Ruby Bridges</i> <i>America the Beautiful</i> <i>Ivan, the Remarkable True Story of the Shopping Mall Gorilla</i> <i>Mama Panya's Pancakes: A Village Tale From Kenya</i> <i>Panda Kindergarten</i>	How to Study a Theme How to Study People How to Study a Place How to Study a Character Trait How to Study a Character Trait How to Study an Animal

How the Assessments Are Embedded in Weekly Instruction

Courtesy of Rick Harrington Photography



Effective teachers assess as they instruct. We continually watch for clues in our students' literacy behaviors and performances that alert us to what our students know and are able to do. All of these observations, whether derived from students' oral or written responses, become our data, the evidence we use to plan the teaching next steps. This is the essence of formative assessment: to inform. But data-driven instruction needs a coherent set of grade-level expectations, and here is where the English language arts (ELA) standards come in. The standards help us know *what* our goals are, the skills we are meant to be teaching, and they are a means of tracking students' progress in the primary grades. By aligning the formative assessments in this book to standards, they become rooted in a more universal, research-based foundation.

In kindergarten, first, and second grades our purpose is not to sum up students' performance with a score but to build on what they can do right now to move them to the next level of achievement as efficiently as possible. Why are scores not particularly useful? Because young children's cognitive capacities change so rapidly in the early grades that today's score may be next week's old news.

Within each and every unit I offer two types of tools that can be used to inform instruction. These tools are most typically used in the close reading follow-up lessons on Days 3 and 4 of the weekly plan. This means a total of eight lessons per unit.

- **During Reading:** A card, a set of cards, or a chart helps students track their thinking using oral response *during* the lesson.
- **After Reading:** A Reader Response Frame guides written responses *after* reading.

Active Reader Cards: Noticing Key Details







 I noticed ...	 I noticed ...
 I noticed ...	 I noticed ...
 I noticed ...	 I noticed ...

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Reader Response Frame: Noticing Key Details

My name: _____ Date: _____

Question: What key detail did you notice in this part of the text?

I noticed a detail that is _____
new surprising confusing

My example from the text is: _____

I think the author included this detail to help me understand _____

Reader Response Frame: Noticing Key Details

My name: _____ Date: _____

Question: What key detail did you notice in this part of the text?

I noticed a detail that is _____
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My example from the text is: _____

I think the author included this detail to help me understand _____

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Under each standard, beginning on page 25, I explain how to use the particular card, set of cards, or chart to monitor your students' understanding during close reading. Following is a general explanation of the purpose of the cards and Reader Response Frames and how to use them.

During Reading Success: It's in the Cards

One of the challenges of developing our youngest learners' comprehension skills is that they are still very concrete little thinkers, while reading is largely an abstract process. Thus, holding onto a card during reading is a gentle reminder to a child that his or her brain is supposed to be *doing* something to make meaning. I have used many different kinds of cards with students (even older students) over the years and they like them—a lot. Moreover, cards work! The cards begin on page 25.

Purpose of the Cards: The purpose of all of these cards is to keep students actively engaged and to provide the teacher with a quick and easy way of monitoring which students understand a concept or skill fairly well and which students need additional support.

When to Use the Cards: Students (or pairs of students) physically manipulate the cards in response to the lesson's focus standard and skill. For example, if the skill is identifying story parts, a student might work with a partner during the lesson to jointly summarize the story, referencing the story parts.

How to Match the Cards to Skills: There are different cards for different skills. The lessons specified for Day 3 or Day 4 of the follow-up lessons each week will always indicate which cards will be most useful for that day's lesson. *However, these cards may surely be used independently of the lessons and materials in this book.* Use them in your small groups with leveled texts! Use them in literacy centers for independent or partner work. Use your imagination and invent other ways that these cards can help your students become active, engaged readers.



Courtesy of Rick Harrington Photography

After Reading Success: Framing Students' Thinking

Another challenge of comprehension instruction in the primary grades is that students' written language skills typically lag significantly behind their oral skills, making it difficult for them to represent the quality of their thinking on paper. Reader Response Frames for open-ended comprehension questions can be one means of moving students toward more solid written response.

Purpose of the Reader Response Frames: The purpose of Reader Response Frames is twofold: to provide an organized structure for students' written responses and to specify the kinds of textual evidence that a particular comprehension question requires readers to identify. The Reader Response Frames supplied in this book support the twelve standards-based skills reinforced in the weekly follow-up lessons. The goal

is for students to capture in writing their thinking about a particular skill as it relates to one of the anchor texts. A written response is often easier to use for assessment because now you have concrete evidence of a student's strengths and needs.

How to Use the Reader Response Frames: Provide a Reader Response Frame to developmentally ready students after they have had a chance to discuss their thinking aloud about the identified comprehension skill as it relates to the week's anchor text. Additionally, all frames should be modeled before students attempt to use them independently so they will have a better understanding of what each sentence starter means. Students complete the remainder of each sentence following the sentence starter. Look for responses that are accurate, well-elaborated with specific evidence from the text, and reasonably fluent for your grade level. With the exception of some key words from the text, students should use their own words in their responses—no copying straight from the book! (See page 21 for more guidance about scoring students' written responses.)

When to Use the Reader Response Frames: Not all students will be ready for written response, and in fact you may want to steer clear of this kind of response entirely in kindergarten. Or, show the frame on an interactive whiteboard or chart and construct the response together. By the beginning of second grade, most students should be ready for this written step. In fact, by midyear in Grade 1, many students should be developmentally capable of writing their own answers to comprehension questions with these frames to scaffold their thinking. Beware of overusing these frames, however. What begins as a critical step in the journey toward independence in written response can quietly lead to *dependence* if we don't wean students off this scaffold. Students can get too comfortable with these handy-dandy frames, which organize their thoughts for them; they need to learn to use these frames as models to organize their own thinking.

Reader Response Frame: Noticing Key Details

My name: _____ Date: _____

Question: What key detail did you notice in this part of the text?

I noticed a detail that is _____ surprising _____.
new surprising confusing

My example from the text is: *Little Red Riding Hood talked to the wolf when she was in the forest even though she didn't know him. You shouldn't talk to strangers because they might hurt you.*

I think the author included this detail to help me understand *something bad was probably going to happen because the girl talked to the wolf.*

How to Evaluate Students' Written Responses

One of the criteria to which students are typically accountable in their written responses is organization. In this case, however, the Reader Response Frame organizes their answer for them so this will not be a factor. For the assessments in this book, I suggest that you consider four criteria, though you will need to decide to what degree each one is appropriate based on the developmental level of your students. Look for the following:

- **Accuracy.** Above all, the response must be correct based on the content of the text. In most cases there will be one clearly correct response. (What is the text feature? Does the detail support the central idea?) But sometimes more than one answer might be plausible. In such cases, look carefully at the way the student has explained his or her choice before considering a particular answer accurate or inaccurate.
- **Elaboration.** Remember that all responses will need to be well supported with evidence from the text. This is something that will be important right from the start, even in kindergarten. Look for textual details that are spot-on, showing a clear alignment between the answer and the evidence for the answer.
- **Fluency.** This is the criteria that will vary the most in the primary grades. If you decide to evaluate student work based on this criteria, you will want to check that the answer makes sense when read aloud. Aim for complete sentences rather than single words or phrases. Aim for language that relies on key words from the text but is not copied word for word. Aim for spelling and punctuation that doesn't get in the way of understanding.
- **Insight.** This criteria may not play a significant role when students' responses are evaluated on high-stakes assessments, but if you want your students to be reflective learners and if you want to maximize the potential of formative assessments for driving instruction, this is a powerful criteria to consider. Can students explain their thinking? Can they tell you *how* they know and *why* something might be important?

The following rubric may need to be adjusted for some responses, but generally these guidelines should help you determine valid scores on the Reader Response Frames. For formative assessment I am less concerned with the composite score and pay greater attention to each of the four individual criteria described above. Note that additional, more specific criteria for accuracy, elaboration, and insights are specified for individual skill assessments under the heading Tips for Evaluating Students' Responses.

Rubric for Evaluating Reader Response Frames

Student: _____ Date: _____

Assessment: _____

	2	1	0
Accuracy	The response is completely correct. The student chose the best possible answer to the question based on evidence in the text.	The response is not completely accurate or the <i>best</i> answer, but the student defends it with reasonable textual evidence.	The response is incorrect. The student chose an answer that cannot be defended based on textual evidence.
Elaboration	The evidence is specific and directly quotes the text or accurately paraphrases it to support the response.	The evidence is text-based but more general than specific. It may be marginally matched to the answer.	The evidence is not text-based, or it doesn't match the answer, or there is no elaboration provided.
Fluency	The response includes complete sentences where needed; language is specific without direct copying from the text; spelling and punctuation do not impede understanding.	The response includes a mix of complete sentences and individual words; there is evidence of some copying directly from the text; spelling and punctuation impede understanding at times.	The response is very difficult to read and contains single words where there should be sentences, or the spelling and punctuation impede understanding, or random words are copied from the text.
Insight	The student supplies thoughtful, insightful analyses of the reasoning behind a response (why or how it is correct).	The student attempts to reflect on the reasoning behind a response, though the insight may be limited.	The student does not attempt to reflect on the reasoning behind a response, or the analysis doesn't make sense.

Student Score

Accuracy	2	1	0
Elaboration	2	1	0
Fluency	2	1	0
Insight	2	1	0

Areas of Strength

Areas of Need



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