Handout: Guide to Generating Questions to Support a Close Read of Non-fiction Text

Citation: Adapted from Achieve the Core

Overview:

There are many aspects in planning for effective instruction aligned with the Common Core State Standards.

At various points in planning it may feel methodical or somewhat "paint by the numbers." This is understandable and perhaps we can identify with how we know our students must feel at times as they build fluency and mastery. As educators continue to implement the CCSS a much higher level of fluency and mastery will develop and higher levels of confidence will emerge. Initially, it is important to methodical enough to validate that effective planning for instruction is occurring. The following elements are provided as a rudimentary guide for a planning process to support:

- Close reading of text
- Designing text dependent questions
- Reflecting on instructional design aligned with CCSS
- Planning for gathering evidence

Why Read Complex Texts?

A central tenet of the CCSS is that when graduates enter post-secondary learning opportunities (career or college) the level of language skills required exceed what many of our graduates are prepared to encounter.

- Gap between complexity of college and high school texts is huge.
- What students can read, in terms of complexity is the greatest predictor of success in college (ACT study).
- Too many students are reading at too low a level.
- (<50% of graduates can read sufficiently complex texts).

Standards include a staircase of increasingly complex text from elementary through high school. Standards also focus on building general academic vocabulary which is so critical to comprehension.

But this raises an important question – "Complex for who?"

In other words, students do not all experience the complexity of a specific text in the same way, so what can teachers do on a continuous basis to monitor the learning that is occurring for each student. It requires far more than just assigning "hard books to read" on one end of the spectrum or only encouraging students to read widely at an independent level.

A Guide to Creating Text Dependent Questions for Close Analytic Reading

Text Dependent Questions: What Are They?

The Common Core State Standards for reading strongly focus on students gathering evidence, knowledge, and insight from what they read. Indeed, eighty to ninety percent of the Reading Standards in each grade *require* text dependent analysis; accordingly, aligned curriculum materials should have a similar percentage of text dependent questions.

As the name suggests, a text dependent question specifically asks a question that can only be answered by referring **explicitly back to the text** being read. It does not rely on any particular background information extraneous to the text nor depend on students having other experiences or knowledge; instead it privileges the text itself and what students can extract from what is before them.

For example, in a close analytic reading of Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address," the following would **not** be text dependent questions:

- *Why did the North fight the civil war?*
- *Have you ever been to a funeral or gravesite?*
- *Lincoln says that the nation is dedicated to the proposition that "all men are created equal." Why is equality an important value to promote?*

The overarching problem with these questions is that they require no familiarity at all with Lincoln's speech in order to answer them. Responding to these sorts of questions instead requires students to go **outside the text**. Such questions can be tempting to ask because they are likely to get students talking, but they take students away from considering the actual point Lincoln is making. They seek to elicit a personal or general response that relies on individual experience and opinion, and answering them will not move students closer to understanding the text of the "Gettysburg Address."

Good text dependent questions will often linger over specific phrases and sentences to ensure **careful comprehension of the text**—they help students see something worthwhile that they would not have seen on a more cursory reading. Typical text dependent questions ask students to perform one or more of the following tasks:

- Analyze paragraphs on a sentence by sentence basis and sentences on a word by word basis to determine the role played by individual paragraphs, sentences, phrases, or words
- Investigate how meaning can be altered by changing key words and why an author may have chosen one word over another
- Probe each argument in persuasive text, each idea in informational text, each key detail in literary text, and observe how these build to a whole
- Examine how shifts in the direction of an argument or explanation are achieved and the impact of those shifts
- Question why authors choose to begin and end when they do
- Note and assess patterns of writing and what they achieve
- Consider what the text leaves uncertain or unstated

Creating Text-Dependent Questions for Close Analytic Reading of Texts

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

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

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

As in any good reverse engineering or "backwards design" process, teachers should start by identifying the key insights they want students to understand from the text—keeping one eye on the major points being made is crucial for fashioning an overarching set of successful questions and critical for creating an appropriate culminating assignment.

 Step Two: Start Small to Build Confidence

The opening questions should be ones that help orientate students to the text and be sufficiently specific enough for them to answer so that they gain confidence to tackle more difficult questions later on.

 Step Three: Target Vocabulary and Text Structure

Locate key text structures and the most powerful academic words in the text that are connected to the key ideas and understandings, and craft questions that illuminate these connections.

Step Four: Tackle Tough Sections Head-on

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

Step Five: Create Coherent Sequences of Text Dependent Questions

The sequence of questions should not be random but should build toward more coherent understanding and analysis to ensure that students learn to stay focused on the text to bring them to a gradual understanding of its meaning.

Step Six: Identify the Standards That Are Being Addressed

Take stock of what standards are being addressed in the series of questions and decide if any other standards are suited to being a focus for this text (forming additional questions that exercise those standards).

Step Seven: Create the Culminating Assessment

Develop a culminating activity around the key ideas or understandings identified earlier that reflects

(a) mastery of one or more of the standards,

(b) involves writing, and

(c) is structured to be completed by students independently.

Reflection on Teacher Intention

Implementing the CCSS requires a high level of precision by teachers in preparing for instruction that supports the needs of all students. As the CCSS emphasizes, selection of materials aligned with the CCSS ELA/Literacy Standards is an essential component of the instructional design process. But selecting materials is only part of the design challenge for educators. The following items are provided to assist you after you have selected appropriate text(s) that are worthy of the instructional time invested.

- Designing Reflective Questions for Close Analytic Reading
- Checklist for Evaluating Question Quality
- CCSS Evidence Guide ELA/LIT K-2 (Single Lesson)
- CCSS Evidence Guide ELA/LIT K-2 (Over the Year)
  (**Note**: the Evidence Guides for **K-2** were selected to demonstrate that CCSS implementation tools/rubrics require the same intentionality of educators serving the needs of diverse learners at the earliest grades. Educators working at grades 3-12 can still use this guide/process and access the Achieve the Core website or CCSSI website for Evidence Guides that match current teaching context.

Designing Reflective Questions for Close Analytic Reading

In order to effectively engage students in ways that emphasize what is emphasized in the CCSS, **evidence of planning** is required. In conjunction with using the 7 step process outlined above, use the following questions to guide your own reflection on the degree to which you are confident you have addressed each step. Any gaps in planning may result in a gap in implementation, so the goal is to be aware of this potential to maximize student engagement.

The creation of instructional **artifacts** (tangible documents, instructional materials) is evidence of planning and intentionality. Through effective planning, the real target of impacting student learning is more likely to occur. Remember that the real evidence sought is not just evidence of teacher planning – but **evidence of *student learning***.

 1. Have I thought about what I think is the most important learning to be drawn **from the text**? What artifacts do I have to reflect this?

2. Have I determined the **key ideas** of the text? Did I create a series of questions structured to bring the reader to an understanding of these? What artifacts do I have to reflect this?

What artifacts do I have to reflect this?

3. Did I locate the most **powerful academic words** in the text and integrate questions and discussions that explore their role into the set of questions above?

What artifacts do I have to reflect this?

4. Have I identified which **standards** are specifically addressed in the series of questions created? Are there any other standards suited to being a focus for this text? If so, have I designed questions that align with those standards?

What artifacts do I have to reflect this?

5. Are there any other academic words that students would profit from focusing on? Have I planned for **sufficient discussion time** or additional text-based questions to focus attention on them?

What artifacts do I have to reflect this?

6. Have I identified which sections of the text that will present the **greatest difficulty** for students? Did I craft questions that support students in mastering these difficult sections? Did these areas involve difficult syntax, particularly dense information, and tricky transitions or places that offer a variety of possible inferences?

What artifacts do I have to reflect this?

7. Have I developed a culminating activity around the idea or learning identified in #1? Does the task reflect mastery of one or more of the standards, involve writing, and can be completed by students independently?

What artifacts do I have to reflect this?

Checklist for Evaluating Question Quality

✓if yes	Criteria:	Comments/Questions/Fixes (refer to specific questions!):
A. Text Dependent: These things must be true of <u>every question</u> in the set. When evaluating questions, discard all questions that get a "no" in Section A		
	A1. Does the student have to read the text to answer each question?	
	A2. Is it always clear to students that answering each question requires that they must use **evidence from the text** to support their claims? (Standard One should always be in play!)	
B. Important Considerations: These are design factors to keep in mind for the entire question and task set.		
	B1. Do students have an opportunity to practice speaking and listening while they work with these questions and tasks?	
	B2. Do questions include appropriate scaffolding so **all students** can understand what is being asked (Are the questions worded in such a way that all students can access them)?	
	B3. At tricky or key points in the text are there check-in questions for students to answer so that teachers can check on students' understanding and use these sections to enhance reading proficiency?	
	B4. Do questions provide an opportunity for students to determine the meaning of academic vocabulary in context? When possible, do some of these questions explore some aspect of the text as well as important vocabulary?	
	B5. Does the mix of questions addressing syntax, vocabulary, structure and other inferences match the complexity of the text?	
C. Text Specific:		

	C1. Are the questions specific enough so they can only be answered by reference to this text?	
	C2.Are the inferences students are asked to make grounded logically in the text (Can they be answered with careful reading rather than background knowledge)?	
D. Organization of the Questions:		
	D1. Do the early questions in the sequence focus on specific phrases and sentences to support basic comprehension of the text and develop student confidence before moving on to more challenging tasks?	
	D2. Are the questions coherently sequenced? Do they build toward gradual understanding of the text's meaning?	
	D3. Do the questions stay focused on the text and only go beyond it to make other connections in extension activities *after* the text has been explored?	
	D4. If multiple texts/different media are under consideration, are students asked to examine each text closely before making connections among texts?	
E. Culminating Activity or Writing Prompt:		
	E1. Does the culminating task call on the knowledge and understanding acquired through the questions?	
	E2. Does the writing prompt in the culminating task demand that students write to the text and use evidence?	
	E3. Are the instructions to teacher and student clear about what must be performed to achieve proficiency?	
	E4. Is this a task worthy of the student and classroom time it will consume?	

The Shifts required by the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy are:

1. Regular practice with **complex text** and its **academic language**
2. Reading, writing, and speaking grounded in **evidence from text**, both literary and informational
3. **Building knowledge** through content-rich non-fiction

This Guide aims to provide concrete examples of what the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in grades K-2 look like in daily planning and practice. It is designed as a developmental tool for teachers and those who support teachers.

Date: _____   **Teacher:** _____   **Class:** _____   **Text Used:** _____   **Lesson Focus :** _____

When the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy are effectively integrated into planning and practice, the following should be evident in each reading foundation, instructional reading, or read aloud and reading comprehension lesson. Depending on the focus of the specific lesson, some sections below may be appropriately left blank. It is not expected that all these components of CCSS-aligned instruction would be observable during each ELA or Literacy lesson.

READING FOUNDATION LESSONS

EXPECTATION	EVIDENCE OBSERVED OR GATHERED				
1. Lessons include the explicit, systematic development of foundational literacy skills for all students.	*These expectations should be evident in planning and observable in instruction.*				
A. The skills being taught are aligned to the standards for foundational skills at this grade.	Yes		No		**Notes:**
B. Students are provided the appropriate resources, including time, materials and attention, to master the skills being taught	All Students	Most Students	Some Students	Few or No Students	
C. There is evidence of ongoing assessment of the foundational skills of each student.	Yes		No		
D. There is evidence of regular instructional adjustment based on assessment results.	Yes		No		

Note: Refer to pages 15–17 of the *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy* for Reading Standards: Foundational Skills (K-5) (corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy).

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INSTRUCTIONAL READING LESSONS

EXPECTATION	EVIDENCE OBSERVED OR GATHERED			
1. A well-crafted set of instructional materials is at the center of the lesson.	*These expectations should be evident in planning and observable in instruction.*			
A. A majority of instructional reading time is spent working with texts selected to advance students' foundational skills.	Yes		No	Notes:
B. The texts selected develop students' foundational skills, engage students in reading, and form a coherent sequence.	Yes		No	
C. The reading skills being addressed give students the opportunities required to acquire a solid foundation in reading.	All Students	Most Students	Some Students	Few or No Students
D. Questions and tasks address foundational skills by attending to specific features of the text such as word structure, phonetic patterns, and concepts of print.	Most	More than Half	Less than Half	Few or None

EXPECTATION	EVIDENCE OBSERVED OR GATHERED			
2. All students are productively engaged in the work of the lesson.				
A. Students persist in seeking evidence for their responses by returning to the text or recalling portions of the text read aloud.	All Students	Most Students	Some Students	Few or No Students	Notes:
B. When discussing or collaborating, students build on each other's observations or insights about the text.	All Students	Most Students	Some Students	Few or No Students

Note: Refer to pages 15–17 of the *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy* for Reading Standards: Foundational Skills (K-5) (corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy).

READ ALOUD AND READING COMPREHENSION LESSONS

EXPECTATION	EVIDENCE OBSERVED OR GATHERED				
1. A high quality text (or multiple texts) is at the center of each lesson.	*These expectations should be evident in planning and observable in instruction.*				
A. A majority of read aloud time is spent reading, listening to or discussing the texts.	Yes		No		*Notes:*
B. The text(s) evidence exceptional craft and thought and/or provide useful information; where appropriate the texts are richly illustrated.	Yes		No		

EXPECTATION	EVIDENCE OBSERVED OR GATHERED				
2. Questions and tasks are text dependent and text specific.					
A. Questions and tasks address the text by attending to its particular structure, concepts, ideas, events and details.	Most	More than Half	Less than Half	Few or None	*Notes:*
B. Questions and tasks ask students to think about what they have read or heard and then ask them to draw evidence from the text to support their ideas.	Most	More than Half	Less than Half	Few or None	
C. Questions and tasks attend to the academic language (i.e., vocabulary and syntax) in the text.	Consistently	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	
D. Sequences of questions support students in delving deeper into text to make nontrivial inferences beyond what is explicitly stated.	Consistently	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	

EXPECTATION	EVIDENCE OBSERVED OR GATHERED				
3. All students are productively engaged in the work of the lesson.					
A. Students persist in seeking evidence for their responses by returning to the text or recalling portions of the text read aloud.	All Students	Most Students	Some Students	Few or No Students	*Notes:*
B. When discussing or collaborating, students build on each other's observations or insights about the text.	All Students	Most Students	Some Students	Few or No Students	

This tool is for use by teachers, those providing support to teachers, and others working to implement the CCSS for ELA and Literacy – it is not designed for use in evaluation. The *CCSS Evidence Guide for Planning and Practice in a Single Lesson* is intended for use in conjunction with the *CCSS Evidence Guide for Planning and Practice Over the Course of the Year*. Both tools are available at achievethecore.org/instructional-practice.

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The Shifts required by the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy are: 1. Regular practice with **complex text** and its **academic language** 2. Reading, writing, and speaking grounded in **evidence from text**, both literary and informational 3. **Building knowledge** through **content-rich non-fiction**	This Guide aims to provide concrete examples of what the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in grades K-2 look like in planning and practice over the course of the year. It is designed as a developmental tool for teachers and those who support teachers.

When the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy are effectively integrated into planning and practice, the following should be evident over the course of the year.

EXPECTATION	EVIDENCE OBSERVED OR GATHERED
1. Students encounter an appropriate balance and sequence of texts.	
A. The texts students encounter reflect a balance of 50% literary and 50% informational texts.	*Notes:*
B. The informational texts students read and hear are intentionally sequenced to develop knowledge.	
C. Students become increasingly fluent in reading grade-level texts independently and with proficiency.	

EXPECTATION	EVIDENCE OBSERVED OR GATHERED
2. Students are asked to practice the range of tasks the standards demand.	
A. Writing tasks are varied, asking students to draw on their experience, on their imagination, and frequently, on the texts they encounter through reading or read alouds.	*Notes:*
B. Students regularly participate in shared research projects based on focused questions.	

EXPECTATION	EVIDENCE OBSERVED OR GATHERED
3. There is evidence of student mastery of grade-level foundational skills and English Language Arts and Literacy standards.	
A. There is evidence of ongoing and regular assessment of students' progress on foundational skills and the English Language Arts and Literacy standards.	*Notes:*
B. There is evidence of regular instructional adjustment based on ongoing assessment.	
C. Students demonstrate increasing independence in reading, writing, speaking and listening tasks.	
D. Students demonstrate increasing facility with grade appropriate academic language (i.e. vocabulary and syntax) in speaking and writing.	

Note: Refer to pages 15-17 of the *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy* for Reading Standards: Foundational Skills (K-5) (corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy).

Effective integration of the Common Core State Standards for ELA and Literacy requires regular and productive collaboration among teachers over time.

EXPECTATION	NOTES
The teacher regularly and productively collaborates with other teachers to improve practice.	*This expectation places particular emphasis on shared responsibility for prioritizing time and effective structures for teacher collaboration.*
A. The teacher collaborates to find and share high quality and suitable instructional resources, including texts and assessments.	
B. The teacher collaborates to examine student work and develop strategies to improve student learning.	
C. The teacher collaborates to observe, analyze, and improve their own and their colleagues' practice.	

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