

PLANNING *for* INSTRUCTION

Building Knowledge for Writing from Deep Reading

TEACHERS AT WORK

Ms. Miller puts down a book and looks out at her class of sixth graders. She has just read *Seeds of Change*, a children's book about Wangari Maathai, the Nobel Prize winner who led the effort to reforest Kenya. "So, what do you think?" she asks the students. "What more would you like to know about Wangari Maathai?"

The students have loads of questions. What got her interested in this work? Where is Kenya anyhow? Why did they lose so many trees? Did her work actually turn Kenya green again? Who helped her?

"Well," explains Ms. Miller, "we're going to be answering all those questions and more over the next week. As you already know from *Seeds of Change*, Wangari Maathai seems to have made quite a difference in the world—and we're going to be writing about that on Friday. Right now, though, we're going to do some close reading about Wangari from an article in the *New York Times*."

"The *New York Times*?" objects Deanna. "That sounds pretty hard."

"Well, it's a challenging article, for sure," says Ms. Miller, "but don't worry—we're going to read it together, very closely, with lots of chances for you to reread and discuss. You'll do just fine!"

Ms. Miller passes out copies of the article to her students so that each student has a copy. Then she passes out a worksheet with what looks like a series of questions about the text.

Some student grumbling ensues. This looks like a lot of questions!

"Do we have to do this whole thing by ourselves, today?" wonders José. "This will take forever!"

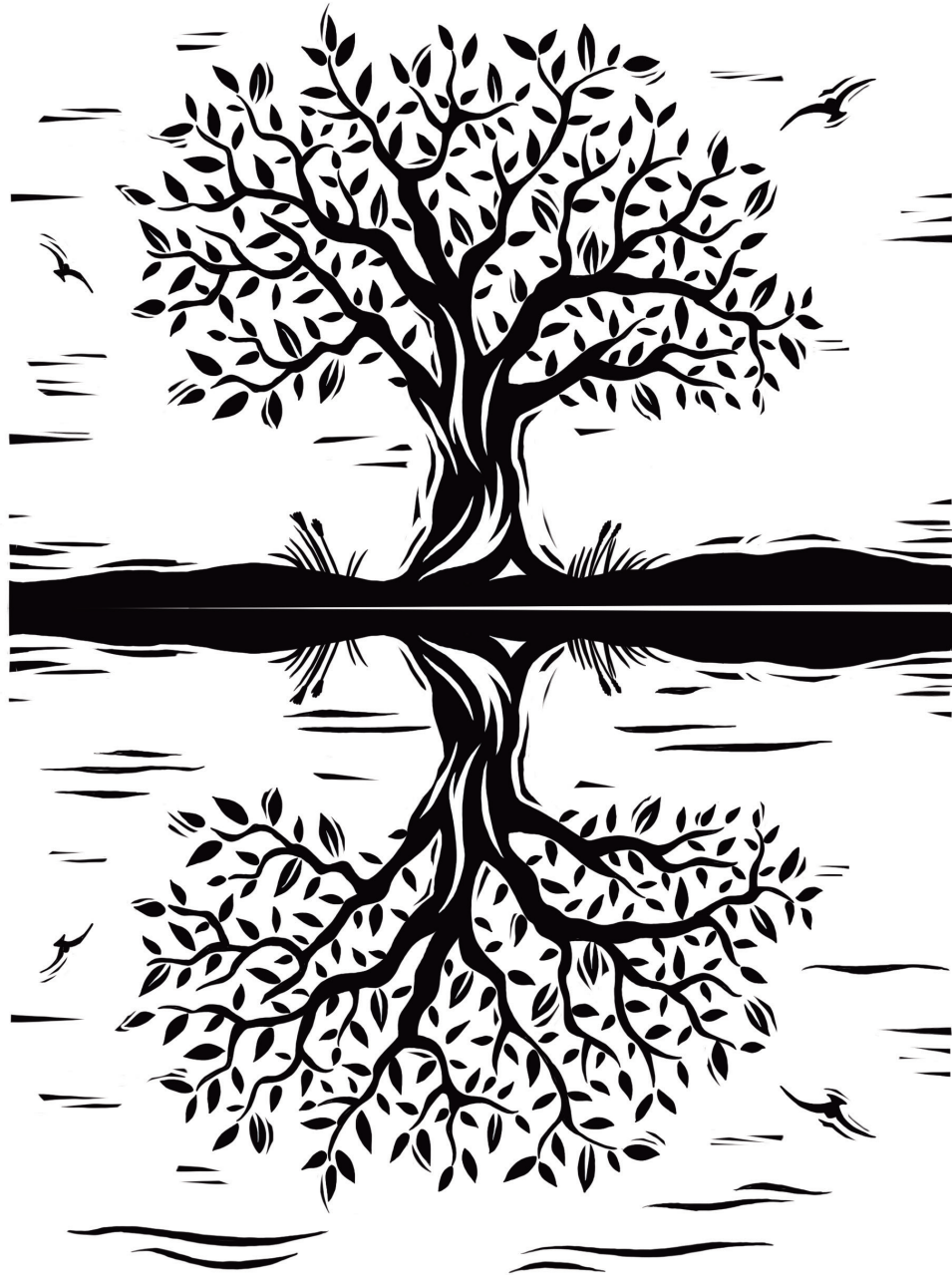
"Well, you're right, it will take a while," concedes Ms. Miller. "But just wait—this isn't what you think. In fact, I think you'll find the way we work with these questions to be pretty helpful."

She explains to her sixth graders the process they will follow for this close read. First, she will read the whole text aloud for them while they read along in their heads. After that, they will work in partners, using the questions to guide them. Their partners will be a big help—as they reread small bits of the text at a time, they will have a short time to discuss how they will answer, then jot that down. The class will stay together—before they go on to the next question, they will discuss as a class the answer to each question. That way, nobody will get stuck.

"You'll see," Ms. Miller adds, "that the questions will vary. Sometimes it might be about a particular word. Sometimes you might need to do a bit of paraphrasing. Sometimes you might even need to think about a connection to something else you've read. But whatever it is, I promise you—it will help you read and understand this *New York Times* article about Wangari Maathai and help you understand what an impact she had on the world."

Quickly, Ms. Miller groups the students into pairs. As promised, she reads the text aloud first while they read in their heads, then directs the class to work with their partners to answer the first two questions. As the students begin work, Ms. Miller listens to their conversations.

Robert and Sabrina consider the second question, which says, "In paragraph #2 what does the word



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reforest mean?”

“Beats me,” declares Sabrina. “I guess maybe we should look it up?”

“Maybe we can figure it out,” says Robert. “Look, the rest of the sentence says she paid poor women to plant trees, and a forest has trees...”

“Oh yeah,” recalls Sabrina. “And we already know that about her from that picture book that Ms. Miller read, that she planted trees—zillions of trees!”

“So, sometimes my dad asks me to rewash the car, and he means I need to do it again,” Robert muses. “Maybe *re* means again—so maybe *reforest* means to bring forests to Kenya again?”

Sabrina looks relieved. “Robert, let’s write that down right now—before we forget!”

When Ms. Miller pulls the class back together a moment later, she asks Sabrina and Robert to share how they answered the question about the meaning of *reforest*. When they tell her and explain how they figured it out, Ms. Miller puts up her hand in a high five.

“Good problem solving, you two!” she tells them. “Let’s see if anyone has another way to figure it out... and by the way, it seems pretty clear to me that you are all going to be good newspaper readers by the time we’ve finished this article!”

○ What is **close reading**, and why does it matter for writing?

Close reading is an approach to reading that helps students successfully navigate text that they might otherwise find too challenging. Using carefully sequenced text-dependent questions, close reading drives students back to the text, over and over again, to answer those questions. As students reread to think about the answers, they are constructing deeper and deeper meaning from the text. At first (and for any new topic or text), the close reading is closely guided by the teacher, showing students how close reading helps them understand. Ultimately, of course, the goal is for students to internalize the approach of close reading—so that they have the skills and the habits of mind to guide themselves successfully through a challenging text.

○ Why does close reading matter?

Writing for Understanding rests on the premise that effective writing cannot exist without deep understanding of the content one is writing about. In the classroom, knowledge can and should build in lots of ways, but here we are going to concentrate on building knowledge

for writing through reading. Why is this reading/writing connection so important?

How close reading helps students become stronger readers

First, students’ ability to read well when they leave school matters enormously. As educators, our job is to do everything in our power to make sure kids can read for understanding. More opportunity for focused reading makes this more possible.

Further, when students write clearly and thoughtfully about text, they are far more likely to build deep understanding of that text than if they did not write. In other words, thoughtful writing can actually help develop and support strong reading.

In addition, research tells us that for students who do not yet read at grade level, the most effective way to help them do so (besides teaching foundational skills when needed) is to have them read successfully about connected, coherent content. This may seem counterintuitive. The teaching profession has spent many decades asking teachers to find students’ own individual reading level and having them do most of their reading at that level, trusting that this will incrementally increase their reading level. Often it does—and often it does not. For many reasons (not enough time, the increments move too

slowly, there is no opportunity for class-discussed content with everyone reading something different, and more), too many students do not learn to read competently when only this approach is used.

How close reading helps students write more effectively

A key pillar of Writing for Understanding is that building substantive knowledge matters—and a key aspect of that knowledge is a significant amount of rich and complex text from which to build a coherent knowledge base. We just explored the idea that when teachers tie reading purposefully to writing, when the proficient writing depends on students building knowledge from text (accurately!), reading is very likely to benefit. So, of course, is writing. This benefit is particularly true of **shared reading of complex text**.

Here's the reason why.

- **Shared reading of complex text is more likely to build stronger vocabulary.** Even in the early grades, students need to use precise and increasingly domain-specific vocabulary when they write. This is helpful for two reasons: it helps students acquire a richer vocabulary, which is closely connected to greater reading achievement, and it makes this particular writing itself more thoughtful.
- **Shared close reading is a social, conversational process, not a solitary act.** Close reading enables students to think more deeply about text as they talk in small groups, consider ideas that are very important to the meaning of the text—and then use those ideas in their writing.
- **Shared reading of rich, complex text is a move toward equity and confidence.** Rather than saying to kids, "Read what you can, what is just right for you," it says, "Writing about this rich text is for everyone, and we will make sure it is accessible to you." A classroom where equity is the dominant principle is one where students are most likely to be willing to share and learn from one another when writing.



Remember, the purpose of close reading is to make text truly accessible.

STUDENTS AT WORK

What might the sixth-grade essays about Wangari Maathai and the impact she had on the world look like? The essay on the next page came from one of the students in the class. Along with their classmates, the student closely read the *New York Times* article and another shared text. As a class, they took notes from both texts, focusing on what Wangari did and how it impacted the people of Kenya. Once they had taken notes together on a teacher-supplied graphic organizer, each student wrote independently, a chunk at a time.

Wangari Maathai

As Wangari Maathai stared at the river in front of her house slowly disappearing, she remembered how it had been their water source for a long time. In the beginning it was a small stream that provided a steady supply of water for her family, but now as the last drop rolled down the dry riverbed she knew she must fix the problem that had plagued her stream for years, the deforestation of Kenya.

Wangari Maathai, born April 1, 1940, had a dream to bring back forests in her country which in the struggle for fuel had been largely chopped down for firewood. To accomplish her goal she created the Green Belt movement, an organization devoted to planting trees across Kenya. Before the mid 1970's only nine trees were being planted for every hundred cut down. Since it began in 1977 the Green Belt Movement has planted 40 million trees to prevent erosion and water pollution. It also helps prevent poverty because it pays the women a little money to plant the tree seeds.

The Green Belt Movement helps Kenyan women "bring back the green" in Kenya and empowers them in many other ways.

One way the Green Belt Movement helps is they speak out against environmental degradation and corrupt politicians trying to steal public land (parks, reserves, etc) for their personal use. This helped Kenya be greener by keeping parks there. The Green Belt Movement also plants trees in rural Kenya where they have been cut down for firewood and buildings. This is where the Green Belt Movement got its name; the trees looked like a green belt across the land. Now where there was once treeless plain, there is forest yet again. Her planting trees has made a big impact on sustainable development. The Green Belt Movement is self-sustaining, which means it doesn't need charity to run and will keep going for the next generation. The Green Belt Movement is helping Kenyan women plant trees for fuel and to prevent poverty.

Now that Kenya is green again, the women of Kenya are empowered in many other ways. The money they get gives them food, water, shelter, and hope. They also don't need charity to support them. When Wangari Maathai won the Nobel Peace Prize, the women of Kenya gained power yet again and the Green Belt Movement got some recognition for their work. It also gave the women of the Green Belt pride because she was the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. After Wangari's Green Belt Movement had such success, other countries started to do the same. In 1986 the pan-African Green Belt Movement Network was founded. Wangari's Green Belt Movement has empowered not only the women of Kenya, but also women across Africa.

The Green Belt Movement has helped transform Kenya from a desert to a lush forest and the forest has helped empower Kenyans. A little education went a long way to improve Kenya, the Green Belt Movement started as a seed in Wangari's head which grew to be a forest. Wangari's holistic approach to saving the environment and preventing poverty has and will continue to inspire people around the world. Now listen to Wangari's message to the world:
(Continued on next page)

Wangari Maathai (Continued)

We are aware that our children and future generations have a right to a world which will also need energy, should be free of pollution, should be rich with biological diversity, and should have a climate which will sustain all forms of life.

—Wangari Maathai, 1991

MAKING IT WORK

○ What can **instruction in close reading** for writing look like?

Remember, the purpose of close reading is to make text truly *accessible*. Accessible, of course, is the key. It's fine to say that we believe rich, complex text should be genuinely accessible to everyone—but how do we do that?

First, instruction takes into account the particular text itself, and what makes it challenging.

Reading and understanding challenging text, and showing that understanding in clear writing, requires planning for making meaning from text. When the text is complex in some way (either because the ideas in it are complex, or the words and syntax are challenging, or both), then instruction making that meaning-making possible is key. Whether the text is going to be only read aloud (as it probably will be in the early primary grades) or read by students in some sort of guided way, it's crucially important that teachers plan for how all students will make that meaning.

What makes text complex and challenging for students?

A rich text that is engaging and worthy can be challenging for students in variety of ways. Let's take a look at each of these ways in which text is often challenging.

- **The meaning may show an unfamiliar way of thinking.** Meaning includes such elements as recognizing layers of meaning in the text (*Is the author being ironic when he says, "brave new world"?*). It includes seeing the author's purpose (*to make sure the reader knows how important pollinators are*). It might include the complexity of a concept (*MLK believed in nonviolence*). If kids are going to have a shot at writing proficiently, their teachers need to anticipate what aspects of *meaning* in the text they need to get access to and provide for those during instruction.
- **Students may not be aware of the text structure.** Structure includes such whole-book elements as chapters and text features (*How do the chapters work? What do the captions contribute?*). It also includes elements such as how time is managed in the text (*Do events happen in chronological order? Are there flashbacks?*). If the text is a poem, what job does each stanza do? Understanding a structure makes it easier for students to make meaning of a text—and therefore to write about it proficiently.
- **The text may depend on contextual or other knowledge that students don't have.** Knowledge sits outside of the text—and sometimes, outside-the-text knowledge makes a big difference in whether students can make meaning of the text itself (*What does a positive attitude look like? Where is Uganda? What does have an impact mean?*). Being judicious

A key principle of an effective close-reading sequence is that all students are focused on making meaning, all the time.

about what outside-the-text knowledge to give students, and when, is part of good instruction for meaning-making of text—and, of course, for bringing that meaning-making to proficient writing.

- **The text may use language that is unfamiliar to students.** Language includes such elements as vocabulary and the syntax of sentences. It might also include dialect or specialized language of some sort, (say, Shakespearean English or the novels of Zora Neale Hurston) or the use of metaphor or other imagery (*this little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine*). When teachers plan for successful grappling with the language in the text, students are far more likely to make meaning of the text—read it with solid understanding—and then show that understanding in proficient writing.

Important to remember: while the teacher is doing all of this exploration of the rich text, they need to keep the central idea of the whole unit they are planning front and center—including the focusing question. There are lots of potential rabbit holes to go down when analyzing what makes a text challenging. Instruction that helps students navigate the challenging aspects that are most likely to contribute to a thoughtful, proficient piece of writing is the goal!

Close reading always involves multiple opportunities to read the text.

Over the years, we have noticed that one of the qualities that distinguishes strong readers from weak readers is that strong readers expect to reread a challenging text to be able to understand it. Effective close-reading instruction builds this in for everyone. While this can look quite different depending on the text, the grade level, and other circumstances, it generally involves at the very least a movement from “gist” or basic level understanding up through deeper, more analytic understanding.

The close-reading questions are text-dependent and planned with the writing piece in mind.

The Writing for Understanding teacher has planned backward from the writing task, and they've written a test-drive of what they hope students will be able to write. Because of this, they know quite specifically what information and understanding students need to gain from reading. Questions that push students back to the text, repeatedly—related to the understanding students will need to write—are the text-dependent questions that form the heart of the close-reading task.

The close-reading questions are largely sequential—the way one would read.

When we read and construct meaning from text successfully, we read, for the most part, in the order in which the text was written. This is also true of effective close-reading questions. Unlike typical end-of-the-chapter questions, close-reading questions do not skip around. Largely, they follow the order of the text, helping the reader build meaning as they go. If students are to eventually internalize and transfer close-reading habits, they must internalize a process that will actually help them construct meaning of challenging texts.

In close reading, all students are talking ideas (oral processing) all along the way.

A key principle of an effective close-reading sequence is that all students are focused on making meaning, all the time. For all students, and especially for students for whom the reading is particularly challenging, building understanding through oral language is fundamental. The close reading will include many opportunities for turn-and-talk about the text, in pairs and small groups and sometimes with the full class.

While they are closely reading, students are capturing their knowledge in notes.

Like the text-dependent questions themselves, this process of capturing knowledge in notes can look quite different depending on grade level, text, and other factors. Whatever form it

takes, guided note-taking is an important feature of a successful close-reading experience. The act of writing the notes helps students process their understanding, and having the notes is a tool when students come to gather evidence for writing and finally for composing itself.

○ Some **watch-out-fors** when designing close-reading instruction

Clearly, a lot is going on in an effective reading-for-writing instructional lesson. Sometimes, thinking about what *ineffective* reading-for-writing instruction might look like is helpful. Consider the following:

- **We do not want to think of close reading as a little quiz.** Close reading is not the same as a set of end-of-the-chapter questions that a student might or might not get right. Ms. Miller was not quizzing her students or even checking for understanding; rather, she was using carefully crafted text-dependent questions sequentially to help students build meaning for themselves.

- **We do not want to think of the goal of close reading as fitting in as many reading standards as possible.** Close reading certainly addresses reading standards, but “the most standards wins” is not helpful to students. In fact, this approach tends to fragment understanding for kids (decidedly unhelpful!).
- **We do not want to think of approaching close reading as an independent homework assignment.** While room certainly exists for independent, homework-type close reading at times, this does not allow for students to build meaning of a text (through close reading) with others; instead, it turns it into something more like the “little quiz” model. Ms. Miller’s instruction was interactive and conversational, so that the academic work they were doing was part of their community of conversation.

Overall, the relatively recent recognition of the fundamental importance of strong knowledge building before writing is critically important. When teachers build it intentionally into the instructional process, the benefit to students—all students—is huge. Once again, equity requires nothing less.

TOOL:

A specific and practical resource
for planning and instruction

Building Understanding

Sorting Evidence

Imagine that, as a Writing for Understanding teacher, you are moving right along in your instructional planning process. You have a rich and challenging text or topic, and you know what you hope to have your students write at the end to show their understanding of it. You've written a test-drive to make sure the unit will work. Now, you're ready for an important step: making sure that all your students are able to build both the knowledge and the understanding they will need to be able to write.

As you may remember reading, *knowledge* refers to concrete, specific facts, details, pieces of evidence. Knowledge is essential if students are to write effectively. *Understanding* is more than that—it depends on knowledge but represents more of a synthesis, a pulling together of facts and details and bits of evidence into deeper understanding.

One way to help all students move from knowledge to

understanding is by using an activity called an *evidence sort*. To give you an idea of what an *evidence sort* is, consider this example.

A fifth-grade class has been reading *Brian's Winter* as a full group. After they've finished, their teacher plans on having them write to the focusing question, "What qualities help Brian survive?" In each chapter, they have been guided to record key details/facts about what Brian does in his quest to survive the winter marooned in the north country. Now that they have read the first five or six chapters, the teacher poses the question, "So, what qualities does Brian have that are helping him survive?"

To help them think about this, she has made piles of note cards, each with a specific detail/fact/bit of evidence—knowledge—of something Brian has actually done. Putting the students in pairs, each pair with a set of cards, she instructs them to group the evidence

into two piles in ways that make sense to them. As the students work, they talk—why do these two details about using flint and rabbit skins belong together? How are they showing the same thing about Brian?

Once the student pairs have made two piles of facts/evidence, they talk about them with the teacher in guided discussion. Several students point out that one of the evidence piles shows how good Brian is at using things he found in nature, and their teacher tells them there is a word for that—*resourceful*.

Note: *resourceful* is not a word in the text. It is a concept the teacher is introducing—giving them a word for a quality the students can infer and induce but cannot yet name. It is a concept that requires synthesis—moving from knowledge to understanding.

By the time students have completed the activity, they have discovered that much

of what Brian does to survive shows how resourceful he is, while lots of other evidence shows how willing he is to learn from mistakes—more synthesis of knowledge into understanding. When writing about the text, students have an “understanding hook” to hang details/facts onto—and are in a much better position to write a strong essay.

Note: not every bit of evidence, every detail, fits a category—some will be less important than others. And not every student will see the same categories in the same way. That’s a good thing. It’s part of the critical thinking that goes into strong analysis, at all grade levels. The rich discussion that goes into coming up with reasonable synthesizing, from discrete facts

to categories and concepts, is a helpful way of moving from knowledge to understanding.

An evidence sort can be useful to build deep understanding at every grade level, K–12, with a great range of student ability. It is one more tool in the equity arsenal!

Evidence Sort Instructions for Students

Making Sense of Information

An activity to help you organize your evidence

Note: Please prepare for this activity by putting each piece of evidence you have collected on a separate card or sticky note.

Directions:

Congratulations—you have collected lots of evidence to help you answer your research question! Now you will work together to organize and make sense of the pieces of evidence you found.

Work as a group to sort your evidence in a way that makes sense. Begin by putting similar pieces of evidence together. Don’t be afraid to move the evidence around and try different ideas. Share your thinking. Talk about what you are doing and why. Remember, you do not need to include every piece of evidence in the sort.

Once you have put the evidence into groups that make sense, add a descriptive title to each group. The title should explain why you chose to put that evidence together. Each member of your group should be prepared to explain the reasoning behind the decisions you made.

Reflect: What did you discover when you made connections between pieces of evidence? How did this build your understanding of your topic?