Teaching Students How to Do Close Reading of Complex Texts
(Originally titled “Unlocking the Secrets of Complex Text”)

In this article in Educational Leadership, Mary Ehrenworth (Teachers College, Columbia University) shares some pointers on helping students engage in close reading. The following steps will help develop students’ discernment, perceptiveness, and enjoyment – provided that teachers choose engaging, authentic, complex texts (Ehrenworth distinguishes between complex and difficult: a textbook can be difficult without being complex, and a high-quality nonfiction trade book can seem easier and yet be complex):

- **Reading for multiple and implicit ideas** – Students need to be taught to look for more than one message and read between the lines.
- **Promoting transfer** – Teachers need to constantly show students how they can apply their close-reading skills to other parts of the curriculum and their personal reading.
- **Analyzing craft** – “As readers learn to ask themselves what a text is teaching them, we also want them to analyze how the text is teaching them,” says Ehrenworth. What is our emotional response, and what causes that?
- **Developing critical stances** – Many students have been led to believe that nonfiction is true, fiction is not true. They need to learn that nonfiction is someone’s perspective on the truth – and fiction can convey deep truths. “Ultimately, we want students to feel that they haven’t really read about something if they’ve read only one text on the topic,” says Ehrenworth. We want them to constantly revise their thinking, reflect, and remain open to new ideas.
- **Constructing arguments** – “When students are invited to research and debate authentic arguments – arguments about search and seizure, the legal drinking age, deployment of the atom bomb, nuclear energy, or whether the class should go to the zoo or the museum for the next field trip – they tend to research with a fierceness that you don’t often see in school,” says Ehrenworth. “You’ll see them circling parts of articles, combing websites, replaying newscasts, and comparing and contrasting evidence.”

None of this, she concludes, should result in students being bogged down in too much close analysis. Reading widely remains a key goal; teachers should hone students’ eye but let them loose on lots of fresh texts. It also helps if teachers are talking to each other about their own close reading of engaging texts so the practices spread throughout the school. Here are some questions that students and adults might ask themselves as they read:

- What does this author want me to know? What does the text teach me?
- What does this piece want me to understand? What new ideas and concepts does the text suggest?
- What does the author want me to feel? What emotions does this passage stir up?
- How does it accomplish all this?
- Whose perspective is represented?
- Whose point of view is most fully explored?
- Who is honored or privileged in the text and how? Who is marginalized?
- How does the perspective in this text compare with others on this issue?
- How does the author use persuasive techniques, literary devices, or writerly craft to convey meaning?

“Unlocking the Secrets of Complex Text” by Mary Ehrenworth in *Educational Leadership*, November 2013 (Vol. 71, #3, p. 16-21), [www.ascd.org](http://www.ascd.org); Ehrenworth can be reached at maryehrenworth@post.harvard.edu.

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