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# Interacting with Informational Text for Close and Critical Reading in Kindergarten Through Third Grade

by Jill Erfourth, Theresa Hasenauer, and Lorri Zieleniewski



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Imagine observing a classroom where the teacher engages students in a literacy lesson that begins with open-ended, higher-level questions about a specific topic. Technology is being used to enhance instruction with multimedia videos, photos, podcasts, or music. Students eagerly begin to inquire further about the topic as they start to read and interact with a piece of text. At the same time, the teacher is guiding them through a process that supports digging deeper into informational text for greater comprehension. This might seem like a lesson in a secondary classroom, but indeed it is not. This engaging process takes place in a primary elementary classroom using research-based strategies within a framework that helps students understand informational text. Students learn to analyze the text based on Four Questions of Close and Critical Reading, which are text-dependent questions. The comprehensive strategy called Guided Highlighted Reading (GHR) gives all students, regardless of their reading ability, access to complex text with modeling and scaffolding. This interactive strategy fosters close and critical thinking, develops a

deep knowledge base, and helps students identify expository text structures. As stated in our book *Interacting with Expository Text for Close and Critical Reading* (2016),

Expository text offers particular challenges to the reader because abstract and unfamiliar concepts are often presented in an unpredictable organizational pattern. Students should be taught the hierarchical structure of expository text and the interrelationships among ideas—what experts refer to as text structure. (p. 11)

Students need multiple opportunities to seek out and identify signal words and phrases of specific text structures to make sense of the text. Text structure is defined as how a text is organized. Proficient readers use text structure to help them make sense of what they read. Narrative text structures are often easier to remember and organize because the structure follows a story with a beginning, middle, and end. Students in the younger grades are exposed to narrative text earlier and more often than

informational text. When teaching expository text, “Reading researchers have argued that knowledge of text organization, or structure, is an important factor for text comprehension” (Akhondi, Malayeri, & Samad, 2011, p. 368). At the K-1 level, the framework is used to guide discussions about the text and build oral language needed in later years to interact with more challenging text. Can elementary students confidently and accurately interact with higher level, complex text? They absolutely can!

### Four Essential Questions of Close and Critical Reading

In our book, *Interacting with Informational Text for Close and Critical Reading*, each individual lesson takes place over a 3-4 day period. Each day engages the students in a different purpose for reading which is centered around the Four Essential Questions of Close and Critical Reading: *What does the text say? How does the text say it? What does the text mean? What does the text mean to me and the world in which I live?* The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) propose that teachers have students interact purposefully with increasingly complex text to build skill for comprehension and stamina. The GHR framework embeds strategies and tips that can simplify this process for any student in order to facilitate effective understanding, analysis, and synthesis of what is read. In grades 2-3, students have the text in front of them and are highlighting in response to specific teacher-guided prompts to answer the four questions of close and critical reading. At the K-1 level, this process looks different in order to scaffold reading of the text. The text is read aloud and students are interacting with the text on large chart paper or on an interactive whiteboard. Fisher and Frey (2015) explain, “Close reading isn’t only about eyes on the print; it is more accurately a means to explore the comprehension of ideas and structures more deeply” (p. 5). The architects of the CCSS note in Appendix A that “by reading a story or nonfiction selection aloud, teachers allow children to experience written language without the burden of decoding, granting

them access to content that they may not be able read and understand by themselves” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 27).

### Guided Highlighted Reading Framework

Research-based strategies are embedded within the GHR framework beginning with building background knowledge, which includes discussion questions and multimedia such as video clips, links to photos, podcasts, music, and photos. This prepares all students for the content of the text and provides background knowledge for students that may be new to the topic. It also provides students the opportunity to make connections to the new information they will learn. For example, a lesson and text from the book published by Capstone entitled *Three Cheers for Trees* is about the carbon footprint we leave. Through video and engaging discussion, students become familiar with the concepts in the book prior to reading the text. This leads to the next steps of the lesson: a discussion and direct instruction of vocabulary words within the text that may interfere with comprehension. According to Marzano (2004), research indicates that “students’ comprehension will increase by 33 percentile points when vocabulary instruction focuses on specific words important to the content they are reading” (pp. 68-69). Explicitly teaching vocabulary from the content of the text further builds background knowledge and helps to scaffold the text, especially for especially for students who many not have had previous experience with the concepts presented. These initial steps of the lesson prepare students for the first read and highlight key ideas for a summary.

**Day 1: Essential Question 1. What Does the Text Say?** Managing students is a key component in the Guided Highlighted Reading strategy. On day one, the teacher sets a purpose for reading with a focus on what the text says. As mentioned above, on this first day of the lesson, important vocabulary words are explicitly taught prior to reading the text.

During the first read of the text, students highlight the key ideas through teacher-led prompts. The text is read aloud while each student has a copy of the text for highlighting. Students in grades K-1 may use highlighter tape to interact with a larger copy of the text on chart paper or a highlighting tool on an interactive whiteboard. This scaffolding guides students to identify key ideas in a text in order to support them in summarizing what is read. Figure 1 is a snapshot from *Three Cheers for Trees*, a text for grades 2-3, demonstrating the specific prompts

for question one. After identifying key ideas, the teacher models summarizing the text by having students refer back to what they have highlighted.

**Day 2: Essential Question 2. How Does the Text Say It?** On the second day, students look at the text through a different lens. The focus now is on question two: *How does the text say it?* This allows the young learners to conduct a close read of the text for deeper meaning, which includes identifying text structure, text features, author's craft, word choice,

Figure 1.

<b>Three Cheers for Trees! A Book about Our Carbon Footprint</b> By Angie LePetit, published by Capstone	
<b>P1</b> Every step you take on a beach leaves behind a footprint. So do wet steps on a dry sidewalk or a trek through a muddy yard. Your footprints change the places that you go. But what does a carbon footprint do?	<b>Paragraph 2:</b> Highlight what doesn't look like a foot.
<b>P2</b> A carbon footprint doesn't look like a foot. In fact, you can't see it at all! But it is a mark you leave behind. A carbon footprint measures how much you change Earth by using its fossil fuel energy.	<b>Paragraph 2:</b> Highlight what a carbon footprint is.
<b>P3</b> Coal, oil, and natural gas are fossil fuels. They are found deep inside Earth. They have given us energy for many years. But once we use them up, they will be gone forever.	<b>Paragraph 2:</b> Highlight what a carbon footprint measures.
<b>P4</b> A hot, polluted planet isn't good for anyone. That's why we need to make good choices about our energy use. The smaller our carbon footprints, the healthier we keep Earth.	<b>Paragraph 3:</b> Highlight the three types of fossil fuels.
	<b>Paragraph 3:</b> Highlight what will happen once we use up fossil fuels.

Figure 2.

<b>P8</b> There is something else that can help us use less electricity. Can you guess what? TREES! In summer trees shade our homes and keep them cool. In winter trees help keep our homes warm by blocking cold winds.	<b>Paragraph 8:</b> Highlight the two effects have during the summer.
<b>P9</b> Trees are also needed to clean the air. They suck up the gas that makes Earth hot. Then trees give us oxygen to breathe. When too much gas is put in the air, trees can't keep up. This is why we need to use fewer fossil fuels. One tree makes enough oxygen for two people to breathe. Let's plant more trees!	<b>Paragraph 9:</b> Highlight what the trees suck up that makes Earth hot.
	<b>Paragraph 9:</b> Highlight what trees give us to breathe.
	<b>Paragraph 9:</b> Highlight the cause/effect sentence in paragraph 9.
<b>P10</b> Trees preserve life. Without them Earth would overheat. And we'd have nothing to breathe! Let's be mindful of what we use and do to take care of our planet. A smaller carbon footprint means a happier home for us all.	<b>Paragraph 10:</b> Highlight what we should be mindful of.
	<b>Paragraph 10:</b> Highlight the final cause/effect sentence about a smaller carbon footprint.

and the specific style that the author chose. In order to facilitate this, teachers revisit the summaries the students generated on day one, as well as the anticipatory set, providing specific prompts. After that, teachers implement activities that dive deeper into the meanings of the words explicitly taught on day one to enhance students' vocabulary. Last, teachers provide students with specific prompts to guide them in highlighting the text for a different purpose. Figure 2 shows highlighted words and phrases from question two. Students begin to see that authors use specific words, organizational structures, and figurative language to convey a message. In *Three Cheers for Trees*, prompts to point out the cause and effect structure are highlighted so students become familiar with words and phrases that signal specific text structures. Therefore, "This text shows a cause/effect structure. The cause is using too much fossil fuel energy and the effects are what it does to our environment. What are the effects of using too much fossil fuel energy?" (Erfourth, Hasenauer, & Zieleniewski, 2016, p. 85).

If students learn how authors use words to signal text structure, they can begin to search for these words on their own and understand how the text is organized. This will help make the text more predictable, making understanding simple and straightforward. Students who learn to use the organization and structure of informational texts are better able to comprehend and retain the information found in them (Goldman & Rakestraw, 2000; Pearson & Duke, 2002).

**Day 3: Essential Questions 3 and 4.** Questions three and four foster collaboration and discussions where young students learn to participate in conversations in whole-group, small-group, and one-on-one settings in a purposeful and systematic way. Depending on your students, these discussions can be done after question two or on the following day. When beginning these lessons, we recommend doing questions three and four on day three, especially in grades K-1. In this model, the passage is read again on day three, and the first two questions

are revisited before moving on to questions three and four.

The main discussion focuses on meaning, theme, and connections in order to answer question three, *What does the text mean?* And question four, *What does it mean to me and the world in which I live?* At this stage in the process, teachers do not provide specific prompts, but instead they focus the discussion on these broad questions. Teachers need to give students opportunities to speak and be heard. Hearing other perspectives fosters deeper thinking and helps students to make higher-level connections. In addition, teachers should take into account and focus on developing all students' listening skills and oral language development, including those with disabilities and Emergent Bilinguals.

***Essential Question 3: What Does the Text Mean?***

For question three, the students discuss with each other the author's message and/or theme. For example, the *Three Cheers for Trees* lesson states:

The author's purpose in this book is to inform readers of what they can do to be mindful of the fossil fuel energy we use so we can reduce, or minimize, the carbon footprint we leave behind. Why do you think the author wants you to know the effects of using up our fossil fuel energy?" (Erfourth, Hasenauer, & Zieleniewski, 2016, p. 85).

***Essential Question 4. What Does it Mean to Me and the World in Which I Live?***

These discussions often lend themselves to making connections and to question four, *What does it mean to me and the world in which I live?* This is where students make text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections. In each lesson in our book, we provide specific questions to help foster discussion, such as, "Have you done any of the things in the text to help reduce your carbon footprint?" and "What specific things can you do at home to reduce your carbon footprint?" (Erfourth, Hasenauer, Zieleniewski, 2016, p. 86). In the initial stages of these lessons,

students may need prompting or sentence stems to explain their thinking. In our experience, this does not last long, even when working with the younger students. They begin to formulate their own connections and begin using phrases like *this reminds me of or that's the same thing that happen to me*.

## Concluding Thoughts

It is powerful to see such young learners engaging in deep discussions about complex text and relating to it in a variety of ways. If young children can have meaningful discussions about a particular text, then they truly have comprehended its meaning. Having purposeful, engaging, and rich discussions allows students to gather background information to make the classroom more equitable and allow for deeper understanding. These connections with text can be achieved through the comprehensive strategy of Guided Highlighted Reading.

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