

Text-Dependent Questions: A Cognitive Pathway Through Text

The access points found in *Rigorous Reading* (Frey & Fisher, 2013) offer teachers a research-based approach to instructional planning that is carefully designed to scaffold and support readers as they gain and grow in their expertise in the close reading of complex texts. As teachers support students through the practices outlined in the previous section, our attention turns to the need to prepare text-dependent questions that serve as a scaffold for readers as they learn to grapple with aspects of text “that are challenging or confusing” (Fisher & Frey, 2015a, 4). Classroom discussion plays a key role not only in the construction of knowledge, but it also fosters students’ engagement and willingness to go beyond telling *about* text to the deep and thoughtful analysis *of* text. Researchers have long noted the power of dialogic teaching (see Wilkerson & Son, 2011). Fisher and Frey (2015b, p. 27) identify three facets to distinguish this type of robust dialogue from other types of classroom talk.

1. Sustained dialogue, not just short questioning cycles
2. Uptake, such that the teacher poses new questions **derived** from the comments of students
3. Authentic questions that do not always have a single correct answer

To scaffold for this kind of critical thinking, Fisher and Frey (2015a, 2015b) offer a clear and linear pathway to question development in their four phases of close reading, organized around the cognitive levels in the Depth of Knowledge (DOK) framework developed by Webb (2002).

The practice and use of close reading begins with a reader’s foundational understanding of the literal level of text, moving the student to a more thorough and deeper exploration into a text’s meaning. The phases, outlined by Fisher and Frey (2015a, 2015b) and drawn from the work of reading researchers, are intended to unfold over several lessons. Fisher and Frey offer cautionary note for teachers to avoid viewing the phases as a recipe for reading. These phases work within a context of rich discussion and attention to the necessary scaffolding students may require to grow as engaged, meaning-seeking readers. A brief discussion of each of the four phases follows.

Phase I: What Does the Text Say?

In this phase, questions focus readers’ attention to major points in the text such as plot and sequence, key characters, and main ideas and their supporting details. These questions, along with connected lines of inquiry, ensure students form general understandings of text. Fisher and Frey (2015b) note that while it may be tempting for the teacher to reveal key ideas, the teacher will find it prudent to assume a partnership role in which teacher and students coauthor this understanding to build on in the next phases.

Phase 2: How Does the Text Work?

Phase 2 questions serve a key role as a bridge to the next phase: what the text means. These questions, analytic in nature, parse and probe the parts of text to understand the text as a whole. This phase is importantly placed following the first in which the reader creates a “whole.” Studies demonstrate that an understanding of the structural elements of text affect understanding of the text as a whole (Pressley, 2002). Insights and understanding about text structure, whether expository or literary, and their respective features play an important role in students’ comprehension. In addition, scaffolding readers in noticing the author’s intentional decisions about word choice and craft elements (i.e., mood, tone, sentence variety, and text features) contribute to the reader’s comprehension. Shifting readers’ focus “to reading like a writer” strengthens their understanding of both meaning and how texts are built. After focusing on these foundational aspects of Phases 1 and 2, the teacher transitions the reader to the next phase.

Phase 3: What Does the Text Mean?

The focus of this phase is about supporting readers as they gain an understanding of a text by making inferences. Inferring forces a reader to go beyond the literal meaning, arriving at meanings supported by text evidence but not explicitly stated in the text. Some researchers have called inferring the art of “gap filling.” Readers infer an authors’ purpose, their point of view, the decision to use a particular text structure or forma and also make inferences about intertextual connections, an understanding of how both print and media texts compare and contrast within and across genres and platforms. Skilled readers grow increasingly more sophisticated networks or constellations that offer them rich reservoirs to access.

Phase 4: What Does the Text Inspire You to Do?

The previous three phases outline the journey readers undertake to developing the habits of a close, careful, and engaged reader. These phases unfold in linearly, but readers crisscross them recursively to reach a destination. In this final phase, readers take some kind of action that has been inspired by learning something new. These text-dependent tasks take a number of different forms. Readers may be inspired to give presentation in which they develop both the content and their presentation skills. They may craft their response to text in written form, selecting an appropriate purpose and mode. Text-dependent tasks often include research opportunities that strengthen both the spoken and written products. Classroom debates offer another possibility for students to showcase their understandings gleaned in close and careful reading. To further tap students’ comprehension, teachers create summative assessments, developing questions that require textual evidence and synthesis of key ideas.

The process outlined in this paper provides an important focus that informs teachers’ planning and results in students’ growth as readers. Fisher and Frey incorporate a wide range of reading research with attention to best practices in the access points and the phases for creating high-quality text-dependent questions. These access points and phases will guide educators as they develop thoughtful and engaged readers, capable of crafting their own questions themselves.

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