

Reading with an Eye on Craft/ Close Reading

In her book *Reading Like a Writer*, Francine Prose speaks to the importance of close reading: “I read closely, word by word, sentence by sentence, pondering each deceptively minor decision the writer had made.” (2006,3). We embrace close reading as a way to focus students’ attention on the craft of writing.

Close Reading

A key to close reading is pace. We need to slow students down as they read and provide a focus that helps them see and appreciate each choice a writer makes. We embrace Tom Newkirk’s definition of slow reading as “the relationship we have with what we read, with the quality of attention that we bring to our reading, with the investment we are willing to make.” Newkirk calls on us as readers to “commit ourselves to follow a train of thought, to mentally construct characters, to follow the unfolding of an idea, to hear a text, to attend to language, to question, to visualize scenes” (2012,2). To instill this habit of slowing down as readers requires practice and focused attention on the writer’s craft.

Words

We often start our slow reading with a focus on words. As Prose puts it, “All the elements of good writing depend on the writer’s skill in choosing one word instead of another” (2006,16). To help with this effort, we ask students to focus on specific words or parts of speech in a chapter or excerpt.

Tom Romano writes about the importance of well-chosen verbs: “Verbs move forward writing. Verbs carry action. Verbs eliminate wasted energy and verbiage. Active verbs, my linguist friend Max Moorenberg says, move readers across the white space” (2004, 158).

This emphasis on words also supports vocabulary development. Janet Allen reminds us that vocabulary instruction that “makes words meaningful, memorable, and useful begins with rich shared experiences,” and that such experiences usually come from “texts that are chosen for common reading” (2007, 95-96).

Our goal is to get students to think about words, to respect the word choices made by writers they read, to be attentive to their own word choices as writers, and perhaps even to fall in love with words.

Noticing Words Strategy

Students can use sticky notes to flag words as they are reading. You can give them a particular focus of looking for active verbs, or another part of speech.

Sentences

“The well-made sentence transcends time and genre. A beautiful sentence is a beautiful sentence, regardless of when it was written, or whether it appears in a play or magazine article” (Prose 2006, 36). We invite students to build on their close reading of words by finding examples of “well-made sentences” in a text they are reading. We have students share these lines aloud so that we fill the classroom with “beautiful sentences.”

We share Neil Postman’s recognition of the importance of a well-written sentence: “There is no escaping the fact that when we form a sentence, we are creating a world. We are organizing it, making it pliable, understandable, useful” (1995, 84). We want students to look closely at how sentences are constructed—to determine what makes a good sentence.

We also want to focus students’ attention on sentences that address specific topics or themes.

Sentence Study Strategy

1. Write a sentence on the board from the text students are currently reading.
2. Ask students to list things they notice about the sentence.
3. Have students share their observations.
4. Ask students to find their own example of a well-written sentence from the text and share it in a small group.
5. Have each group select the “best sentence” from the group and present it to the class with their analysis of the sentence.

Make sentence study a regular routine. Use this strategy along with other variations.

Figurative Language

We want our students to see, hear, smell, and feel what they are reading. Figurative language taps into their sensory response. We invite students to read for examples of simile, metaphor, and personification. We also appreciate how figurative language shows the craft of writing. We want students to be able to identify examples of figurative language in support of character and setting.

Figurative Language Study Strategy

Have students look for examples and try their hand at writing their own examples that would enhance selected parts of text.

Paragraphs and Structure

“In general, remember that paragraphing calls for a good eye as well as a logical mind. Enormous blocks of print look formidable to readers, who are often reluctant to tackle them. Therefore, breaking long paragraphs in two, even if it is not necessary to do so for sense, meaning, or logical development, is often a visual help. But remember, too, that firing off too many short paragraphs in quick succession can be distracting... Moderation and a sense of order should be the main consideration in paragraphing”

-Strunk and White (2007)

Structure matters. We want students to know this before they take on the task of structuring their own essays. We want them to notice long paragraphs and the single sentence paragraph and consider how these choices impact them as readers.

We provide students with the opportunity to look closely at paragraphs as they read. We have also had success with a hands-on activity that provides students with multiple paragraphs and asks them to put them in an order that makes sense to them as readers.

Paragraphs and Structure Strategy

1. Provide students with envelopes containing a multi-paragraph excerpt from the text that has been cut into separate paragraphs.
2. Ask students to read each paragraph and arrange them in the order that makes sense to them as readers.
3. Have students then paste their version of the excerpt onto colored paper.
4. Provide students with a copy of the excerpt as it was originally written and have them note or highlight places where their order differs from the original.

Theme

Our hope is that students will understand that theme is more than the message or moral of the story. We want them to see theme as the “so what” of the story—to understand that theme is a lesson or lessons we learn from reading. We want students to dig into the text to look for the quotes that help to reveal the theme(s) as if they are uncovering the precious secret of the story. Reading for theme does not come easily; we have to work for it.

To help students begin to read for theme, we point out some quotes. Depending on what we know about students as readers and the complexity of the text, we may stop and pay close attention to the quote. Where is it located in the text? What does the quote tell us about the story? The characters? How does the quote connect with students’ own lives? Is there a lesson in the quote? We have found this strategy helpful when students are reading longer texts.

But we also recognize the importance of students finding their own examples of quotes that highlight theme. So after some modeling of reading for theme, in which we point out quotes, we ask students to note quotes that they discover as they read—quotes that seem to be saying something important that goes beyond the story itself. For example, when reading Tillie Olsen’s short story “I Stand Here Ironin,” students pointed out this quote: “School was a worry to her. She was not glib or quick in a world where glibness and quickness were easily confused with ability to learn.” Students can mark quotes with sticky notes, but we have also found that theme bookmarks work well.