# 8. Close Reading in the Elementary Grades

(Originally titled “Closing in on Close Reading)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Nancy Boyles (Southern Connecticut University) suggests ways to bring “close reading” – a major theme in the Common Core State Standards – to the elementary grades. “Essentially, close reading means reading to uncover layers of meaning that lead to deep comprehension,” she says. Boyles is critical of the “ho-hum” text-dependent questions suggested by David Coleman and his colleagues in their Student Achievement Partners handbook. All of the questions have a right answer and none of them will generate real discussion, she says.

Boyles urges teachers to take students beyond the text and ask deeper questions that they can apply to other texts on their own:

* What is the author *telling* me here?
* Are there any hard or important *words*?
* What does the author want me to *understand*?
* How does the author play with *language* to add to the meaning?

“If students take time to ask themselves these questions while reading and become skillful at answering them, there’ll be less need for the teacher to do all the asking,” she says. “For this to happen, we must develop students’ capacity to observe and analyze.” Delving deeper, she suggests getting students to ask themselves questions like these:

* Who is speaking in the passage?
* Who seems to be the main audience for this text?
* What is the first thing that jumps out at me as I read? Why?
* What’s the next thing I notice? Are these two things connected? How?
* What seems important here? Why?
* What does the author mean by \_\_\_\_\_\_\_? What exact words lead me to this meaning?
* Is the author trying to convince me of something? How do I know?
* Is there something missing from this passage that I expected to find? Why did the author leave it out?
* Is there anything that could have been explained more thoroughly for greater clarity?
* Is there a message or main idea?
* How does this sentence or passage fit into the text as a whole?

“Students who learn to ask themselves such questions are reading with the discerning eye of a careful reader,” says Boyles. The next step is to look at passages with the eye of a writer, analyzing:

* Imagery, including similes, metaphors, personification, figurative language, and symbols;
* Word choice;
* Tone and voice;
* Sentence structure: short sentences, long sentences, sentence fragments, word order within sentences, and questions.

“Closing in on Close Reading” by Nancy Boyles in *Educational Leadership*, December 2012/January 2013 (Vol. 70, #4, p. 36-41), [www.ascd.org](http://www.ascd.org); Boyles can be reached at [nancyboyles@comcast.net](mailto:nancyboyles@comcast.net).