CHAPTER 1

Overview and Rationale

As many of us are aware, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) initiative was launched in 2009 by state leaders from 48 states through their membership in the National Governors Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). Only 5 years later, "43 states, the Department of Defense Education Activity, Washington D.C., Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands and the U.S. Virgin Islands have adopted the CCSS/ELA [English Language Arts] . . . and are in the process of implementing the standards locally" (CCSS Initiative, 2015). We can't think of any other public school initiative that has come so far so fast.

The implications of the Common Core are a bigger deal than we had imagined. Before the CCSS became a reality in thousands of schools, we were cognizant, in the abstract, that they were a huge endeavor. Now that we realize the Common Core is actually in the hands of thousands of teachers, it kind of takes our breath away.

Beyond our awareness of the enormous scope of the Common Core, we share one motivation for undertaking the writing of this book—our positive reaction to seeing *close reading* front and center. Let us tell you what we knew at the time.

As an English major from undergraduate through graduate school, I (Cheryl) knew what close reading was to the extent that it was an area of literacy criticism under a New Criticism orientation. If asked about how it might be manifested in instruction, I would likely have mentioned "analyzing text." I also remembered clearly that close reading does not allow a reader to interpret authorial intent

because a professor made that clear when he said something like, "You can't consider authorial intent unless you had dinner with the author last night."

I (Isabel) recognized that decades ago I had engaged with close reading in my ninth-grade English class with Ms. McFarland. At the time, I didn't know that what we sometimes did in English class was called close reading. If asked about what we *did* do in English class, I, too, probably would have said something about analyzing what we were reading.

When Ms. McFarland introduced a new novel to us, she usually read aloud the first chapter. I not only remembered, but I can see Ms. McFarland, at the front of the class, reading the beginning of *Great Expectations*. After Ms. McFarland had read Dickens's description of the convict— ". . . a man who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by briars; who limped, and shivered, and glared, and growled . . ." —she stopped. Then she said something like, "Any time I read Dickens's description of the convict, I am in awe of Dickens's ability to bring a character to life." Look at the verbs: *soaked* and *smothered* and *lamed* and *stung* and *torn* and *glared* and *growled*. How different they are from *wet* and *hurt* and *injured* and *yelled*. Ms. McFarland also mentioned the rhythm: "Those staccato phrases—like the shots of a pistol or steady drumbeat. I'll read it again." And she did.

It is now clear to me that she was *modeling* close reading, which is a wonderful way to become acquainted with close reading. She did more than model it, and so did my other high school English teachers. I assume they had been trained when close reading was part of their preparation.

I searched my memory for other high school close reading activities and at first only remembered reading some sentences very slowly, word for word. But several years ago I came across a terrific book, which I shared with Cheryl, *Reading Like a Writer*, by Francine Prose (2006), a prolific novelist, journalist, and teacher. Her description of a close reading activity, hunting for words that had to do with vision and blindness in the two classics *Oedipus Rex* and *King Lear*, shook my memory, and I remember doing the same—but not for which words we hunted. Prose commented on her search for "eyes" words:

> It all seemed so dull, so mechanical. We felt we were way beyond it. Without this tedious, time-consuming exercise, all of us knew that blindness played a starring role in both dramas.
>
> Still we liked our English teacher, and we wanted to please him. And searching for every relevant word turned out to have an enjoyable treasure-hunt aspect, a Where's Waldo detective thrill. Once we started looking for eyes, we found them everywhere, glinting at us, winking from every page. (p. 4)

As the Common Core worked its way into the current scene, three issues, beyond our nostalgia for close reading, motivated our writing of this book. The first issue is confusion about the relationship between comprehension and close reading. The second is about the enormous difficulty of providing adequate quantity and quality of professional development in reading instruction. The third issue concerns the inconsistent quality of instructional materials available on the Internet. We hope this book will contribute to teachers' understanding of all three issues.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMPREHENSION AND CLOSE READING

We start with definitions of the two phenomena. *Comprehension* is, simply put, grasping the meaning of a text. *Close reading* is keen attention to the fine details of language and structure for the purpose of appreciating an author's craft and figuring out how broader-level meanings are developed.

The core of the confusion seems to be whether comprehension is an *outcome* of close reading or a *prerequisite* to close reading. Well, depending on what kind of comprehension, it's both! Surface or gist comprehension comes first and allows one to go on to close reading, which then enables deep or deeper comprehension. A very clear statement of the relationship comes from Jarrell D. Wright's (n.d.) essay "How to Teach Close Reading: Demystifying Literary Analysis for Undergraduates." Included in the essay is a link to a PowerPoint lecture that Dr. Wright gives on the first day of a literary analysis course he teaches that includes close reading.

In his essay, Dr. Wright declares that students must be able "to summarize or paraphrase [a text] accurately before they can go on to the more penetrating work of close reading. . . ." And in his PowerPoint presentation, he reminds students that close reading assumes initial comprehension. He explicitly declares, with what seemed like a little hesitation in his voice, that if students cannot comprehend adequately, they should "go to the resource center," a unit in his university that provides academic support to students having difficulty. This is a good example of the attitude behind the Common Core's concern that students be prepared to engage in college-level work. College professors are expert in their fields and teach and conduct research in their areas of expertise; they do not want to engage in, and most likely are not skilled at, remedial instruction. Thus, the point is that "surface" or "gist" comprehension is absolutely prerequisite to close reading.

Another clear example that comprehension is necessary for engagement in close reading is Timothy Shanahan's (2012) explication of the "first, second, and

third reads." The first read should allow a reader to determine what a text says (comprehension). The second is to analyze how a text works (close reading). The third reading involves consideration of the quality and value of the text and connection to other texts (evaluation, integration).

Finally, it is logically clear that comprehension has to precede close reading. How could one consider an author's choices of words without knowledge of the extent to which a word choice fits or enhances the context, and the like? How can one identify clues to a problem unless one knows that a problem exists?

We have seen example lessons as well as noticed that several reading educators seem to suggest engaging in comprehension and close reading simultaneously. We are hesitant about that as a strategy that shifts attention from what is going on in the text to analyzing the impact of the author's use of particular words or the nature of the author's use of, say, peculiar syntax, that may reduce a reader's facility with both surface comprehension and depth of consideration of the author's craft and structure.

Related to the confusion is what we presently see as lots of attention to close reading—in articles, books, conferences, and conversations—with the sense that comprehension has been relegated to the back burner. All one has to do is look at the National Assessment of Educational Progress's most recent reading results to see that we put comprehension on the back burner to our peril.

So what have we done to reduce the confusion? We emphasize here and elsewhere that there is a sequence—comprehension of a text precedes close reading. We have adopted the notion of *gist before grist*, hoping that it might become a mantra. We view the gist of a text as its surface meaning. In the TV show *Dragnet*, the fictional detective Joe Friday frequently asks the women witnesses of a crime to give him "just the facts, ma'am." "Just the facts" is related to "just the *gist*." By contrast, a variation of the idiom "separating the wheat from the chaff" might be "separating the *grist* from the chaff"—with *grist* meaning something valuable. Given our view that close reading is valuable, we adopted *grist* to represent it. Of course this may be a stretch! But it allowed us to coin the idea of *gist before grist*, which we think is memorable.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Given the scope of the CCSS, it is inevitable that there would be varying degrees of confusion. The confusions we are aware of come not from the standards themselves but from what has grown up around the standards. We have seen or been told about problematic matters that fall into two categories.

One category of complaints is about the quality of professional development (PD) offered to teachers. Although our knowledge is not limited to our locality in that comments have come from several regions, let us hasten to acknowledge that the number of our sources are miniscule. But the comments ring true in that they repeat, with more intensity, what has been discussed for several decades about the inadequate time allotted to PD and about trainers whose expertise on various topics was inadequate. Thus, with school resources especially limited at present, there is no reason to believe that the PD situation has changed. But the need for strong PD is especially important for the Common Core Initiative, given the many changes it entails, some of which are quite fundamental.

A major purpose of this book is to offer PD insofar as it can be done in a book. We model, explain, and provide opportunities to engage in developing components of a comprehension lesson—which involves identifying the content necessary to develop gist comprehension of a story and surface comprehension of informational pieces, transform such content into queries, determine where in the text to interrupt reading and initiate discussion, and more. We also provide texts for the teacher "to try it," that is, to plan the comprehension instruction for a text, which they can then compare with our version of a plan for comprehension that we developed for the same text. Then we suggest which specific features of a given text lend themselves to close reading analyses.

INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

Another category of confusion about the Common Core concerns the inconsistent quality of the mountain of instructional materials for both teachers and students—all labeled as "Common Core aligned"—that are readily available on the Internet and that many teachers use. The CCSS architects made clear that the standards deal with *what* to teach: the *how* to teach had to remain with local control. Thus the *how* is still the prerogative of teachers, schools, and districts.

However, there are abundant resources that attempt to provide *hows* for the standards. Over the last several years, we have become concerned with the quality of these resources, in particular those from the Internet. Many websites offer examples of lessons, examples of text-dependent questions, templates for how to develop text-dependent questions, videos of readers engaging in close readings, examples of what "first read" questions look like, what "second reads" and "third reads" look like, and various additional *hows* for other topics associated with the Common Core.

Some of these websites offering how-to instruction were developed by existing organizations such as state education departments, while others were started

for the specific purpose of supporting the Common Core, such as Student Achievement Partners, a nonprofit organization founded by David Coleman, Susan Pimentel, and Jason Zimba, lead writers of the CCSS. There are also many examples that come from teachers, and an abundance of *hows* from small commercial companies offering their wares.

Why is an abundance of resources not to the good? Obviously, quantity does not mean quality. And material that is not vetted, which is often the case on websites (we know of one exception), may be inconsistent or just plain inaccurate. Many teachers are new to the kind of instruction required by the Common Core and may take instructional suggestions from websites that are weak or that incorporate incorrect information into their lessons. Of course, the quality of websites about existing earlier practices is also highly variable. But teachers already know about these practices and thus are better equipped to choose stronger resources because they can judge information from their own experiences.

As to the quality of the lessons we provide in this book, you will be the judge. There are many lessons that you can review and decide for yourself. We have tried to keep it simple: *gist and grist.*

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

The book is divided into two parts. Part One includes 10 chapters that cover background and the *hows* and *whys* of comprehension and close reading. Chapter 2 takes our readers on a sprint through the theoretical and research foundation in which our work in comprehension was grounded and the instructional practice that ensued—*Questioning the Author* (QtA; Beck & McKeown, 2006)—from which this book's approach to comprehension is derived. We then discuss the major features: queries, discussion, and interspersed reading.

Given the very important role that queries play in scaffolding comprehension, we devote Chapter 3 to the nature and purpose of queries. At the beginning of the chapter we explain the differences between the original QtA queries and the queries we recommend now, given that close reading follows comprehension. We emphasize that queries are *open,* in contrast to *constrained*, and show examples of differences in the kind of language students provide in their responses to those two different types of queries. Chapter 3 also has aspects of guiding a reader toward developing the kind of queries we recommend to the extent that we start to explain the choices we made.

Chapter 4 is devoted to guiding readers through the procedures involved in planning a comprehension lesson for a narrative, in this case the first chapter of

Alice in Wonderland, and for an informational article, "Black Death," about the bubonic plague. The four steps in planning a lesson are provided and applied to both texts with explanations for each instructional decision. Thus, complete comprehension lessons for both *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and "Black Death" (2013) are presented for teachers to use. The goal of this chapter is to help readers gain some familiarity with the procedures involved in developing a gist, or surface, comprehension lesson.

Close reading is the focus in the next two chapters. In Chapter 5, we provide general comments about close reading. We clarify some definitions and present an example of a very competent reader engaging in close reading. We bring up the importance of a large vocabulary and suggest means for engaging with word meanings during close reading. We also offer examples of unpacking the meaning of complicated sentences from challenging text. In Chapter 6, we provide specific close reading activities for the two texts examined in Chapter 4, *Alice in Wonderland* and "Black Death." Taken together, the comprehension lessons in Chapter 4 and the close reading activities in Chapter 6 result in complete lessons for each text.

In Chapters 7 and 8 we implement what has so far been missing— opportunities to independently develop and apply the four lesson-planning steps and to compare your own version of the completed steps with a version developed by those who have more expertise—temporarily, we hope! Those opportunities are provided in Chapter 7 for a narrative, "The Two Brothers," by Leo Tolstoy (1878) and in Chapter 8 for an informational article, "Pythons Invade the Florida Everglades" (2013). Additionally, complete lessons of those stories— comprehension *plus* close reading—are available for use.

Chapter 9 deals with poetry—the ultimate text for close reading. The poet's use of rhythm, meter, rhyme; the extensive development of such figurative language techniques as metaphor or simile, personification, and imagery; and word choice and word order and the like make poetry a treasure chest for close reading.

Chapter 10 is titled "Younger Students: Last but Not Far from Least." The importance of kindergarten to second-grade students' comprehension of simple stories that they can read, and more complicated stories read aloud to them, should not be underestimated. Moreover, some attention to aspects of authors' language is appropriate and useful for younger students.

Part Two of this book presents completed lesson plans for eight texts: five narratives and three informational pieces, two of which are speeches.[1] By com-

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[1]We did not include text lessons for kindergarten through second grade in Part Two, as to a large extent that is what Chapter 10 provides.

pleted we mean each lesson includes a copy of the text that can be duplicated for students' use, as well as queries, segmented text, and close reading activities for each selection.

The primary reason we provided completed text lessons is that they enable teachers to use the lessons designed as we have suggested with students. We think that the key to learning is examples. Examples enable a learner to first go through the "motions" and then to connect the motions with their rationale. Such practice enhances one's ability to develop similar lessons or adapt lessons or add their know-how to lessons.

So we developed the lessons in Part Two with the notion that teachers can use them with minimal preparation and for fairly short classroom time. This is in contrast with the extensive multiple text units found on some websites. We think arranging English language arts (ELA) materials into units is a positive thing, in that this adds coherence and depth to what students read, but these units legitimately require a lot of classroom time. What we do know is that the saying "there's not enough time" is widespread if not universal. What we don't know is how the use of a lot of classroom time for instruction "outside the core program" interacts with various schools' curricula and teachers' concerns about lack of time. Thus we have chosen the path of individual text material. As a result, you will notice that we do not provide separate suggestions for a "third read" because some of the close reading activities found in our lessons would be appropriate for a third read (and maybe beyond—particularly the writing suggestions). So we leave it to teachers to decide whether to work with a text, and the comprehension and close reading instructional plans for it, in two reads or if some activities should go on to a third read, or indeed beyond. Similarly, the suggestions we offer for close reading are only suggestions. It is up to the teacher, under whatever constraints he or she has, to determine whether to undertake all or just some of the close reading activities.

We would like to make explicit what we have implied so far: this book is written for teachers. We've tried to make it teacher-friendly by including all the materials you will need to teach any lesson between the covers of this book. We take the components slowly—first we model gist comprehension; next we ask our readers to develop a gist lesson while we provide prompts; and then we model close reading and ask our readers to develop lessons from beginning through close reading. Finally, we make more completed examples available in Part Two.