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Fostering Reading Enjoyment and Achievement in the School Library

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Fostering Reading Enjoyment and Achievement in the School Library

by Renee C. Lyons, Deborah J. Parrot, Gina Podvin, Millie P. Robinson, and Edward J. Dwyer

In this age of increased accountability through testing and implementation of the Common Core State Standards, the elementary and middle school librarian is often part of the school team working toward enhancing reading achievement among students. The school librarian can play an important role in encouraging higher order thinking and critical reading through implementation of in-depth questioning strategies in collaboration with classroom teachers.

The primary goal of questioning that is based on a selection read is to determine if purposes designated for reading have been achieved. Consequently, asking higher order thinking questions is critical for determining how well specific comprehension objectives have been reached, as well as achieving the overarching goal of fostering comprehension competencies in general. In this light, Roe, Smith, and Burns determined that “critical reading depends on both literal and interpretive comprehension; grasping implied ideas is especially important.”¹ In addition, close reading is an emerging and important strategy for focusing intensely on critical thinking in comprehending a printed message.² A definition of close reading developed by Brown & Kappes is presented below:

*Close reading of text involves an investigation of a short piece of text, with multiple readings done over multiple instructional lessons. Through text-based questions and discussion, students are guided to deeply analyze and appreciate various aspects of the text, such as key vocabulary and how its meaning is shaped by context; attention to form, tone, imagery and/or rhetorical devices.*³

Literal comprehension of a message, that is, being able to recognize what is directly stated, is the foundation of reading comprehension. On the other hand, what is not directly presented and must be inferred by the reader is essential for depth of understanding and for richer reading experiences. In this light, substantial research has demonstrated that teachers ask a disproportionate number of questions requiring only literal comprehension of the material read.⁴ However, one must not dismiss the importance of literal questions. Literal questions can get the students off to a running start. We have found that asking literal questions in a variety of learning environments is highly productive at the outset of discussion relative to material read. Literal questioning

can comfortably flow into more complex questioning strategies. Interpretive questions require students to delve beyond what is explicitly stated and read between the lines to develop a richer understanding of the message read. This is often referred to as “critical thinking” and/or “higher order thinking.”⁵ In this light, Khan determined that too much time in schools is spent on tedious and uncreative learning while, on the other hand, discussion involving critical thinking shared perspectives can foster “intuitive understanding of almost any concept.”⁶ Questioning strategies can encourage what Weil described as “healthy variability” in activities that encourage higher order thinking while discouraging high levels of mundane and predictable classroom activities.⁷ The procedures suggested below present a concise, but powerful set of questioning strategies for librarians, teachers, and other reading support personnel. Questioning strategies are presented herein to foster what Flippo described as encouraging developing readers to engage ideas and concepts rather than just the surface of text.⁸

While working with the questioning strategies, our overarching goal is for the categories to become internalized. That is, librarians and reading teachers do not have to rely on a specific reference to formulate questions but, rather, using the categories of comprehension becomes innate with practice.

In addition, we have found that students are very much attuned to Internet content and readily engage in study of intriguing on-going events. For example, we have found the [British Broadcasting Company](#) website contains substantial news of interest from all over the world. Here is a sample model assignment—Maria Case Study:

Maria, the Roma child, has been very much in the news lately. Watch the videos and study the accompanying text and the leads within the text. Follow other leads relative to this story that spark your interest. Study and reflect on Maria. Provide an approximately 250-word reflection on this story. Place the reflection in the Drop-box provided. This is due on 12 November. As a librarian and/or classroom teacher, you will undoubtedly encounter children like Maria. The environment and geography might be different for you, but complications might be similar. There is no right or wrong in your responses; however, thoughtful reflection is anticipated.

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Please go to:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-24605954>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-24675832>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-24689382>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-24697544>

Such assignments lend themselves to both general reflections and to specific questioning/discussion strategies. On the other hand, we sometimes have to deal with commercial messages which can last about twenty-five seconds.

Reutzel and Cooter cautioned against the over emphasis on lower level reading competencies such as word identification and vocabulary study focused on word meanings.⁹ Although Reutzel and Cooter determined that the lower level competencies are essential for comprehension, they concluded that higher order thinking and application of cognitive strategies is essential for establishing in-depth understanding of text. Consequently, engaging readers in interpretive reading through thought-provoking questioning is an essential component of reading instruction.

Questioning Strategies

The questioning categories proposed by Trosky have worked very well for us at all levels.¹⁰ Although more than forty years have passed since Trosky's publication of the questioning categories, the strategies appear to be as effective as anything that has come along since. We have used the questioning strategies with elementary and middle school students in a variety of environments. The strategies also work well with struggling readers in tutorial and clinical environments. In addition, application of the strategies with college students in developmental reading classes has worked well when students respond in writing as well as orally to questions generated using Trosky's categories. College students in teacher preparation programs also appear to have benefited from implementation of the strategies, especially when preparing the comprehension component of a guided reading activity. Trosky's categories of questions are: 1. Recognition, 2. Translation, 3. Inference, 4. Evaluation, 5. Explanation, and 6. Imagining. Higher order thinking is encouraged through a broad range of questioning and encourages readers "to think beyond the words on the page."¹¹



The strategies presented herein are complementary to comprehension strategies presented in the [Common Core State Standards](#). When we reviewed the Common Core State Standards for grades two through five, we determined that Trosky's categories of questions correlate with and support mastery of a sub-

stantial number of the literacy standards.

Trosky's foundation for developing good questions through the categories presented above is not complicated while presenting an opportunity for providing substantial depth. These strategies can be used at almost any level. For example, we used the strategies for writing questions on a section of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* with college students in a developmental studies reading class. In addition, in undertaking comprehension study with struggling readers in reading clinic and library environments, we found that applying Trosky's questioning strategies using Aesop's fables from collections such as those of Anno and Sneed is very effective.^{12,13} We sometimes rewrite the fables where there is esoteric language that might pose problems for developing readers. A comprehensive source of fables is [Aesop's Fables](#), which contains more than six hundred Aesop fables.

Trosky's questioning strategies also lend themselves effectively and efficiently in preparing comprehension-enhancing activities based on articles from news magazines such as *Time*, *The Economist*, and from online resources such as the *BBC World News*. Topical information from local sources and from news agencies such as the Associated Press can also be successfully implemented. Topical subjects such as homelessness capture the attention of secondary and college level students. This we discovered while working with students placed in college developmental reading classes because of ACT reading scores below nineteen.

The developmental studies college students generally were not enthralled with the prospect of studying how to improve their reading, believing they were off to college to study a variety of career-oriented possibilities. The text originally assigned to them appeared devoid of material of interest to college students, developmental or otherwise, with the leadoff story being about how ducks "imprinted" on a psychologist and followed him around as if he were their natural mother. On the other hand, current events can provide students with interesting material. For example, a newspaper article on a proposed plan to encourage the development of single sex classes and schools proved to be a very engaging topic and a good source for applying Trosky's questioning strategies.

The original story segment presented below and the questions that follow are designed to demonstrate how Trosky's questioning categories can be effectively undertaken:

Dr. Benson drove his horse and carriage through the bitter cold night. He shivered even though he had wrapped himself in a heavy blanket. Old Rex bravely pulled the carriage. It had been almost two hours since Old Rex had eaten or rested but he did not complain. Dr. Benson felt bad that Old Rex had to work so hard, but he knew that every minute was important.

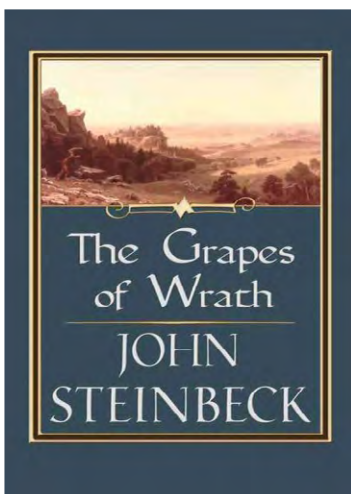
Continued on next page



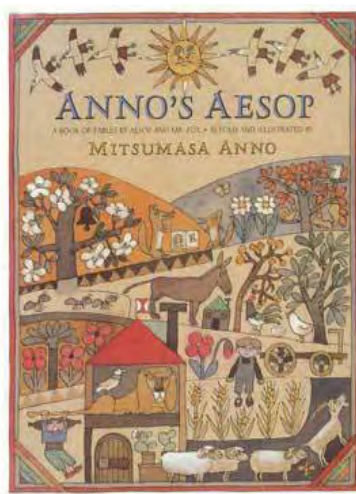
Students engage in shared reading to encourage comprehension and fluency.



A student is shown making puppets to accompany a readers' theater presentation based on an Aesop fable.



The authors used Trosky's strategies for writing questions on a section of *The Grapes of Wrath* for a developmental studies reading class.



The authors sometimes rewrite the fables where there is esoteric language that might pose problems for developing readers.

Recognition/Literal Questions

1. What was the weather like?
2. Who drove the horse and carriage? Literal questions, as mentioned above, can be answered directly from information contained in the text. Even though recognition questions are generally quite easy for the reader (or listener), they are still very important. Answering recognition questions correctly can inspire confidence and establish a basic level of comprehension for the selection. However, it must be kept in mind, as Norton determined through an extensive review of the research, that "questions must be sequenced from less to more abstract in order to get students to operate at higher thought levels."¹⁴

This level of questioning correlates with several Common Core State Standards. One example is the first standard under second grade in the Reading Standards for Literature K-5 section. This standard reads, "Ask and answer such questions as who, what, where, when, why, and how to demonstrate understanding of key details in text."¹⁵

Interpretive/Inference Questions

1. What season of the year was it? The reader can determine that the season is winter even though it is not specifically stated. Of course, a crafty responder might suggest that it could be spring or autumn if the events take place in a northern climate!
2. What was the name of the horse? The reader can determine from the overall context of the message that Old Rex is the name of the horse. Although not directly stated, the reader can logically determine the answer. Sometimes it is necessary to provide direct instruction in defining how one can determine information that is not specifically reported in a message. We have all too often heard readers respond, "It doesn't say."

The Common Core State Standard, "Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text," can be applied to this level of questioning.¹⁵ This standard, which is the first standard under fourth grade in the Reading Standards for Literature K-5 section, teaches students how to show in a text how they were able to make an inference and answer a question that was not clearly stated. Inference questions are essential in the mastery of this standard.

Imagination Questions

1. Where was Dr. Benson going?
2. Did Dr. Benson feed Old Rex and find a place for him to rest when they arrived at their destination? The reader must use imagination and knowledge of the overall setting to determine possible destinations for Dr. Benson. On the other hand, the suggested possibilities must be reasonably grounded in events that are presented in the selection read.

The Common Core State Standard stated above for inference questions also applies to imagination questions. Again, students must examine

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the text closely to determine events, attitudes, and actions that are not clearly stated in the text.

Evaluation Questions

1. Was Dr. Benson mean and cruel to Old Rex because he did not stop to rest or feed him? The reader is encouraged to evaluate the behavior of characters in the message and bring personal values into the response. Determining the correct response to a situation from an ethical standpoint provides for highly interesting and enlightening discussions among readers.

Evaluation questions align with the fourth grade Common Core State Standard, “Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., a character’s thoughts, words, or actions).¹⁶ This standard is found as the third standard in the fourth grade set of standards under Reading Standards for Literature K-5. This standard applies to this level of questioning because the reader cannot rely only on what is said about the character to answer the questions. Readers must look deeper at the character’s own attitudes and actions along with other aspects of the setting to assess the meaning behind the text.

Translation Questions

1. What is another way of saying “bitter cold night”? Inviting readers to use their own language to describe what the author’s words mean to them leads to a richer understanding of the text and often to a greater appreciation of colorful and figurative language.¹⁷ A word of caution is in order! Do not ask, “What did the author mean when he or she said it was a bitter cold night?” This is confusing to students who often mimic the text in response: “The author meant it was a bitter cold night.”

The fourth Common Core State Standard under fifth grade in the Reading Standards for Literature section is, “Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative language such as metaphors and similes.”¹⁸ This standard complements the translation questioning strategy. Translating a phrase in the text into their own words encourages readers to determine meaning and use that knowledge to gain a better understanding of the text.

Trosky’s categories of comprehension provide the librarian and reading teacher with a quick and effective method for developing comprehension questions. The goal is not to categorize questions as the categories often overlap. The goal is to become adept at generating good questions, often on the fly.

Great literature must be part of the curriculum. We have found that using Trosky’s questioning strategies as a major part of the comprehension component of a guided reading activity works well with all kinds of reading materials. For example, *Because of Winn-Dixie* (DiCamillo,

2000) is a story sure to inspire readers from grade three onwards and can be a vehicle for building comprehension competencies. Another example, and there are countless others, is *My Life in Dog Years* (Paulsen, 1998). Most children love dogs and this book of tales of brave and good dogs can be readily used as a reading instructional text with the Trosky questioning strategies.

Other books we have found highly entertaining and worthwhile for developing comprehension through questioning:


- Anno, M. (1987). *Anno’s Aesop*. New York: Orchard Books.
- Bartone, E. (1993). *Peppe, the lamplighter*. New York: Scholastic.
- Brown, S. & Kappes, L. (2012). *Implementing the Common Core State Standards: A Primer on Close Reading of Text*. Washington, DC: Aspen Institute. www.aspeninstitute.org.
- Bunting, E. (1996). *Train to somewhere*. New York: Clarion Books.
- DiCamillo, K. (2000). *Because of Winn-Dixie*. New York: Candlewick.
- Hesse, K. (2008). *Spuds*. New York: Scholastic.
- Hest, A. (1997). *When Jesse came across the sea*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.
- Hutchins, P. (1986). *The doorbell rang*. New York: Mulberry.
- Kasza, K. (2005). *The dog who cried wolf*. New York: Puffin
- Kasza, K. (2003). *My lucky day*. New York: Putnam.
- Kasza, K. (2007). *Badger’s fancy meal*. Putnam.
- McGlone, C. (2008). *Visiting volcanoes with a scientist*. Berkeley Heights, NJ: Enslow Elementary.
- Munsch, R. (2003). *Lighthouse: A story of remembrance*. New York: Scholastic.
- Munsch, R. (1989). *Pigs*. New York: Annick Press.
- Paulsen, G. (1998). *My life in dog years*. New York: Yearling.
- Rathmann, P. (1995). *Officer Buckle and Gloria*. New York: Putnam.
- Rodowdy, C. (1999). *Not my dog*. New York: Sunburst.
- Rylant, C. (2008). *In November*. New York: Voyager Books.
- Rylant, C. (1991). *Night in the country*. Aladdin Paperbacks.
- Teague, M. (2002). *Dear Mrs. LaRue: Letters from obedience school*. New York: Scholastic.
- Trivizas, E. (1997). *The three little wolves and the big bad pig*. New York: Aladdin.
- Sneed, B. (2003). *Aesop’s fables*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers.
- Yolen, J. (1992). *Letting swift river go*. New York: Little, Brown, and Company.
- Zion, G. (1956/2002). *Harry the dirty dog*. New York: Harper Collins.

In addition, we have found that application of the questioning strategies encourages comprehension and prosody when using the same material for readers' theater. Books designated primarily for younger children can be used for developing comprehension strategies with more advanced readers. For example, the story *Badger's Fancy Meal* (Kasza, 2005) is humorous with wonderful illustrations, but also lends itself to developing higher order thinking competencies through questioning.

A favorite follow-up activity is the evening news report. The students get into groups of three or four and prepare a forty-five second news report on an aspect of the material read. The model is the six o'clock local news format. For example, students prepare a news report on an Aesop fable by interviewing witnesses to the events. It is interesting to note, for example, how students use their voices when taking the part of the tortoise or the hare in this timeless story. The news reports are very entertaining and academically sound while reflecting the students' comprehension of the material read. Though not using Trosky's strategies per se, the questions asked by the anchor and the reporter in the field as well as the answers of interviewees reflect the kinds of questions discussed in class. Several school libraries in our area have wonderfully apportioned broadcast studios for students to deliver news to classrooms throughout the building.

Readers' theater performances naturally accompany comprehension study. Students practice reading while engaging in what Rasinski¹⁹ described as prosody, that is, attention to phrasing, intonation, and a sense of drama. In addition, Rasinski determined that practice for readers' theater involves encouraging comprehension when students are encouraged to "make meaning with your voice."²⁰ Students practice readers' theater scripts and, in addition, sometimes produce stick puppets to add to the performance. Enjoyable follow-up activities are essential for establishing a desire to read among students. We have found that Friday afternoon in the school library is an ideal setting for readers' theater.

Questioning strategies described herein complement conclusions reported by Allyn who determined that comprehension is about students having the ability to put forth opinions, hopes, and arguments as they learn to read proficiently and "above all, with comprehension, for deeper meaning."²¹ Creating lively discussions through questioning invites students into the essence of the reading material and the concurrent enjoyment that accompanies broad experiences with text. In this light, we agree with Rome who concluded that reading instruction is as much about teaching children "to **want** to read as it is about **how** to read."²²

Practice using Trosky's questioning strategies in the school library and in collaboration with classroom teachers. You will find, as we have, that you do not have to rely on a publisher to provide comprehension questions. Further, you can be free to use a variety of stories and not be locked into using a prescribed set of reading materials or scripted questions. 

Notes

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