

What Students Can Do When the Reading Gets Rough

With the new focus on close reading and challenging informational texts, students need to take an active role in monitoring their own understanding.



Sunday Cummins

Nick, a 5th grader, sits reading with the informational text held close to his eyes, an intense look on his face. The teacher moves quietly to his side for a reading conference.

When she asks him to tell her about what he's reading, he pauses with a blank look. He quickly glances at the end of the text, then looks up and regurgitates the last fact on the page: "The Himalaya are growing taller." The teacher realizes that Nick either hasn't been paying attention to what he's reading or has been struggling to understand the text, unsure how to help himself.

This is a familiar scenario. Frequently, when assigned to read, intermediate and middle grade students engage in a mindless encounter with the text. Their minds wander. They daydream. Or, try as they might to focus and gather information, they're mostly confused and not sure how to repair the breakdowns in their comprehension.

As we pursue helping students meet the Common Core State Standards, there's a lot of push in the field to engage students in *close reading*, which can be defined as a careful, systematic analysis of a text for a particular purpose (Brummett, 2010). This analysis takes place at the word and phrase levels as well as at the sentence and paragraph levels. A legitimate concern is that students like Nick won't be able to read a text closely for purposes like synthesis of the author's central ideas if they can't self-monitor—noticing what they do and don't understand and then repairing meaning when it breaks down.

A student like Nick can probably do so if the teacher asks text-dependent questions related

to the content (and there's a place for this). However, students also need to learn how to *independently* read a text closely, using text-dependent questions (Boyles, 2012/2013), such as

- What's the author's main idea?
- What details in the text make me think so?
- How do those details support or convey the author's main idea?

Teaching for this kind of self-monitoring doesn't have to be a digression from pursuing the Common Core standards. It's possible to teach students to monitor and repair their capacity for meaning-making as they engage in close reading.

A Productive Inner Dialogue

Let's examine what this might look like with an excerpt from an informational article, "Active Earth" (Geiger, 2010), written for intermediate-grade students. The main idea is that Earth is not an inert entity. Instead, it's active in many ways, and this activity affects the movement of the tectonic plates.

In the following paragraphs, the author offers several key details that support that main idea. If a student can understand this excerpt well, he or she will have a better idea of how to think strategically through the rest of the article.

Collision!

As the plates move, they crash into each other like bumper cars. We see and feel the shifting in many ways: earthquakes, volcanoes, mountain ranges—even hot springs!

Most of this action happens at the edges of the plates, where they meet. Plates meet at convergent, divergent, or transform boundaries. A **convergent boundary** is where two plates collide. A collision between two continents is a real head-banger. It causes the plates to push upward.

That's what's been happening as India crunches into the Asian plate. The plate carrying Asia has been pushed up. Way up. In fact, the collision has created the towering Himalaya Mountains! This

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huge collision is still going on. As it does, the Himalaya grow taller. (p. 12)

Let's say a 5th grader is working on self-monitoring while also reading to determine how key details support the main idea. He or she would have read the whole article first to identify the author's main idea. Then the student would closely reread the excerpt to examine key details. Here's how the student might self-monitor during this close reading:

Before I read, I'm going to remind myself that the author's main idea is that the Earth is active. I figured that out when I read the whole article through the first time. Now I'm going to think about the information in each sentence—information I understand and information I don't understand.

(Student reads the first sentence.)

OK. I know about bumper cars. I've driven one and know that when they crash, the impact jerks your whole body. This helps me understand the force of two plates hitting each other. Bam!

(Student reads the second sentence.)

Here the author is giving me examples of what this hitting looks like. She includes a list of terms I know, like earthquakes and volcanoes. I'm not sure what a hot spring is because I've never seen one, but it's in the list so it must be similar to the other terms—that is, a hot spring, whatever it is, must be caused by the tectonic plates shifting, just like an earthquake is.

So if I think about this first paragraph, I realize the author has helped me by connecting this concept with a familiar experience—bumper cars—and by listing examples of what those crashes cause, a few of which I'm familiar with. I'm starting to better understand what it means for the Earth to be active: Major crashes are occurring, and these cause things like earthquakes.

The student is engaged in close reading. He or she is self-monitoring for understanding and, at the same time, examining how various details help clarify the main idea. The trick is for students to sustain this kind of thinking for the rest of the excerpt and then continue to think critically as they read longer texts on their own.

So how do we help students self-monitor as they're also thinking critically through the text?

Teach the Term *Self-Monitor*

Many students believe reading and understanding should be effortless, and they find complex texts frustrating as a result. They don't realize that proficient readers sometimes lose track or get confused about the meaning of a text but then are able to automatically refocus and skillfully repair their understanding. Engaging students in a conversation about this can be liberating for them. Explaining the act of "self-monitoring for meaning" may help students articulate what they need to do to stay focused on making meaning or why they're confused. Here's an example of a teacher's student-friendly explanation of this process:

Have you ever been assigned to read a text and as you read, your mind wandered to other topics, like what you're doing after school? (Chances are students will nod their heads and smile knowingly.) Or, while you're reading, have you ever struggled to understand?

When we read, we need to self-monitor. This means we need to stay focused on the text while reading and be aware of when our meaning-making

is breaking down. We need to ask questions like, Do I already know this? Is this new information? Do I understand what I just read? If I don't, how do I figure it out? These kinds of questions can help us stay focused on the text and help us determine if we need to reread the text and use particular strategies to make better sense of it.

It's also helpful to articulate other ways students fail to self-monitor. Some students skip over difficult vocabulary without even realizing that this will affect their comprehension. Others may look at photos and illustrations in a text for their aesthetic appeal ("That's cool!"), but they don't consider how these features support or extend the author's central ideas. Or students may realize they've encountered an unfamiliar vocabulary word or idiom, but they're unsure how to figure out what it means.

When discussing the concept of self-monitoring, describe these instances. Chances are students' eyes will open wide when they realize you know exactly what's happening in their minds as they read. They'll be more likely to listen as you model ways to stay focused, concentrate on meaning-making, and repair meaning when it breaks down.

Introduce the Coding Method

I've found that the coding method (Hoyt, 2008) is an effective strategy for students who struggle with self-monitoring while reading informational texts. After reading a chunk of text, students code their thinking using the following symbols:

- * This information is already familiar.
- + This is new information.
- ? I'm not sure I understand this information.
- ✓ I tried to problem solve by _____.

Students write the code on a sticky note and jot a quick thought as a way to track their thinking. For example, if a student was reading the second

paragraph in the excerpt, he or she might stop at multiple points to write the following coded notes:

- + I get what the author is saying about two plates hitting like dinner plates. I had never heard of tectonic plates' "boundaries."
- ✓ At first, I didn't understand "convergent boundary," but then I figured it out by reading the author's description a couple of times and creating a picture in my head. She's saying that this is where two plates collide or crash, and it must be a hard crash because when my brother head-bangs me, it hurts.
- ? I'm not sure what a convergent boundary—two plates meeting and pushing upwards—looks like in real life.

I model and guide students in writing these notes before they try this out with a partner and then on their own.

Sometimes, despite the modeling and guidance, students may begin to code their way mindlessly through an excerpt. This can happen if they don't have a purpose for reading beyond self-monitoring for comprehension. This means they'll use all your sticky notes, write a million "I already knew this" statements, and end up not really understanding the article. One strategy that helps is asking students to pause after coding and reflect on how the thinking they coded helps them better understand the main idea.

For example, after writing the coded notes about the second paragraph, that same student might write the following:

The author wants me to understand that the

Earth is active. She's helped me by telling me about boundaries—places where the edges of the tectonic plates (the Earth's crust) meet and crash. She described one of these boundaries in detail to help me think through what happens when two plates meet. The plates push upwards.

Model, Assess, and Model Again

When I first introduce coding to students, I place a text on the document camera, read aloud a chunk of the text, and then think aloud about what was familiar or unfamiliar, what I understood or what I was able to figure out. I've read the article in advance, determined the main idea, and then written model notes with codes on sticky notes. As I think aloud, I place these prewritten notes onto the article (projected by the document camera) so students can see a visual of my thinking.

After the first lesson, I read through the students' coded notes. What I learn from this formative assessment helps me determine teaching objectives for the next minilesson on self-monitoring. For example, if there are few coded notes about what the students didn't understand, I'll model writing these types of notes during the next lesson. If they're writing about how they figured out the meaning of a chunk of text they didn't understand but they only used a few limited ways of doing so, I'll model additional ways to solve the problem.

For example, let's say several students who were confused about something in the text write that they chose to reread the text to help clarify the meaning.



However, I find that there's no indication in their notes that this approach actually helped. I might model how using features like photographs and captions can help me better understand the text. I might model continuing to read with my questions in mind, seeking out answers that might surface later on.

Sometimes a student's coded note can serve as a model for classmates. For example, a student might write the following note:

✓ I know what a convergent boundary looks like now! The author gave me a real-life example—the Himalaya. Then I looked at the photo of the Himalaya Mountains, and I completely understood. Those big ridges in the photo are where the edges of the plates pushed up.

During the minilesson, I'd place the sticky note on the document camera and ask the student to share her thinking and how she monitored for meaning. Students usually appreciate having their work affirmed in front of their peers, and this conversation can propel students forward in their own engagement with texts.

The goal of teaching students to code their thinking is for them to self-monitor automatically, *without* the sticky notes and codes. Some students will need to continue coding more than others to stay on task. Others will quickly understand what they need to do and take flight as readers.

Provide Time and Support

To help students become proficient at self-monitoring, provide plenty of quality time for students to immerse themselves in sustained reading of informational texts (Hiebert, 2009). The more students read these kinds of texts, the more familiar the themes and structures will feel to them when they read texts that are less familiar. They'll also become more comfortable working their way through complex, sometimes frustrating, texts.

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The tricky part is getting students to choose these texts. To invite curiosity, prominently display engaging informational texts in the classroom library and book-talk them. Ask the librarian to share new texts with students, and encourage students to discuss the texts and read one another's reviews of them. Coach students as they read to support them as they tackle longer, more complex texts (Cummins, 2011). And be sure to read informational texts aloud to students (Cummins & Stallmeyer-Gerard, 2011). This can increase students' interest in picking these texts up on their own.

Informational texts have changed drastically in the last 10 years. Authors strive to capture and sustain the reader's attention. The texts often have attractive designs and layouts with features that help the students access more difficult concepts.

Consider Marc Aronson's *Trapped: How the World Rescued 33 Miners from 2,000 Feet Below the Chilean Desert* (Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2011). Aronson narrates the disaster, chronicling the fate of the miners as well as the efforts of hundreds of professionals who worked tirelessly to rescue them and to care for bereaved family members. He describes the ominous conditions of this geographic location and the creative engineering people engaged in solving the problem. Colleagues have told me there's an audible moan when they stop reading aloud *Trapped* for the day—students don't want to stop listening. Once teachers start reading aloud resources like these, these texts and similar titles fly off the library

shelf, independently chosen by eager readers.

Starting Out Right

Before jumping into teaching to the Common Core standards, we need to step back and ask, "What does a student need to be able to do to begin working toward achieving the standards?" If a student is unaware when meaning breaks down or doesn't understand how to repair it when it does, then teaching for self-monitoring is a good place to start. **EL**

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Sunday Cummins is a literacy consultant and author of *Close Reading of Informational Texts: Assessment-Driven Instruction in Grades 3–8* (Guilford Press, 2013). She blogs regularly about teaching with nonfiction at <http://sunday-cummins.com/blog.html>.

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