

Developing Comprehension

by Dr. David W. Moore

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) portray readers who are prepared to successfully enter college and careers as independent builders of strong content knowledge (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). These readers understand and critique complex texts from different genres and disciplines. They value evidence when interpreting authors' messages. As participants in the twenty-first century's global society and economy, they engage with diverse media, ideas, and perspectives.

Hampton-Brown Edge is designed to help high school English learners and striving readers meet and exceed the rigorous CCSS expectations for reading. The program promotes the knowledge, skills, and mindsets required by the standards, and it is informed by major reviews of reading comprehension research (Duke, Pearson, Strachan, & Billman, 2011; Edmonds, Vaughn, Wexler, Reutebuch, Cable, Tackett, et al., 2009; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002; Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007; Torgesen et al., 2007). Central elements of the program include its texts, activities, and instruction.

Content-Rich Texts

The CCSS are all about students acquiring knowledge. Texts that are content-rich contain plentiful ideas and information that contribute to students' stores of knowledge. They help students develop both general and subject-specific understandings. Such texts often highlight diverse cultural and linguistic groups, fueling students' insights into the heritages of others and affirming their own. Drawn from print and digital settings as well as an array of genres, content-rich texts help make reading meaningful and relevant (McKenna, Conradi, Lawrence, Jang, & Meyer, 2012).

As CCSS expectations to read informational texts increase across the grades, high school students benefit from a range of materials such as essays, histories, memoirs, news features, proclamations, scientific expositions, and speeches that are well crafted and memorable. Engaging students with such content-rich literary nonfiction goes far in building content knowledge (Pearson, in press).

Viewing fiction and nonfiction as complementary, each unit of *Edge* includes a wealth of content-rich selections from both genres. Informational texts make up a significant portion of the reading materials. Selections explore science and social studies topics, and they examine personal identity, loyalty, and other life issues. In addition, selections by authors such as Isabelle Allende, Maya Angelou, Sandra Cisneros, Gary Soto, Amy Tan, and Joseph Bruchac permit students to learn about other people and cultures as well as to identify with recognizable characters and settings.

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Complex Texts

The CCSS expect all students to comprehend complex texts independently and proficiently. Raising the text complexity bar for English learners and striving readers is meant to enable them to gain mature insights into the human condition, develop advanced knowledge, and increase capacity with similar challenges.

At the end of each unit, *Edge* provides a complex reading passage that extends the materials students just read. These texts are designed to stretch students' abilities. They meet CCSS quantitative guidelines for complexity based on Lexile® ratings as well as qualitative guidelines based on levels of meaning, structure, language, and knowledge demands.

Engaging vulnerable readers with complex texts involves more than just making them available. It means helping students bridge the gap between their current abilities and the challenges posed by the texts. It means supporting students' efforts to navigate sophisticated linguistic and conceptual structures as well as accomplish rigorous academic work. Consistent with research (Moje, 2007), the CCSS call for scaffolding learners' comprehension as needed.

Edge includes a wealth of instructional-level texts and texts for independent reading in addition to complex texts. There are scaffolds for English learners and striving readers to succeed with all types of texts. The instructional-level content-rich selections provided in each unit give students a running start to prepare them for the complex texts that end each unit. Students are prepared for the especially

challenging selections through the opportunities they have early on to develop needed background knowledge, language, motivation, and confidence.

Other comprehension scaffolds include leveled library books, that offer challenging but not defeating levels of text complexity. Preparation to read includes quickwrites, graphic organizers, and read-alouds. Glosses of unfamiliar words, text-dependent questions for students to think through what they have read before moving on, and post-reading discussion prompts support comprehension. Independent reading in the *Edge* library comes with complete online lesson plans and blackline masters for Student Journals are provided for *Edge* Library books.

Purposeful Activities

According to the CCSS, college and career ready students read purposefully. Purposeful activities, academic engagements that are relevant and interesting, encourage youth to seek meaning vigorously. Purposeful activities emphasize attention to conceptual networks and keeps texts at the center of instruction. They promote students' views of facts and ideas as facts-in-action and ideas-in-action. When purposes for reading are unclear to students, or when they cannot see the relevance of the reading, their comprehension suffers (Guthrie, 2007). This can also be the case when reading purposes do not take into consideration—or are insensitive to—students' social and cultural backgrounds.

Purposeful activities permeate *Edge*. Each unit contains selections unified by a common theme such as the role of media or the importance of creativity to promote coherent inquiries. Each unit begins with an Essential Question like “Do People Get What They Deserve?” or “What Influences a Person’s Choices?” Such questions have no single, simple, or predetermined answers; they allow verbal, artistic, and dramatic responses (Langer, 2002). The program’s emphasis on inquiry helps students see authentic purposes for reading and provokes active thinking.

Edge also consistently sets up discussions to encourage purposeful reading. Combining individual reading with student-led, small-group discussion contributes substantially to learning to understand the texts they read and think critically about (Nystrand, 2006; Soter, Wilkinson, Murphy, Rudge, Reninger, & Edwards, 2008). The program offers students opportunities to talk with partners, in groups, and as a whole class. Knowing they soon will talk with their peers about what they have read provides high school students an audience and a meaningful reason to read. During these exchanges, students explain and justify their interpretations while noting features of others' interpretations that they might take up for themselves. Such talk helps students clarify and organize their thinking about selections, promotes metacognition, and develops argumentation skills.

Close Reading

The CCSS place close reading “at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex works of literature” (p. 3). Because good books don't give up all their secrets at once (King, n.d.), close reading is a sensible part of readers' repertoires. Readers benefit from strategically reading and rereading selected instructional-level selections and complex texts closely and attentively. The practice of close reading includes four fundamental characteristics (Adler & Van Doren, 1972; Beers & Probst, 2012; Hinchman & Moore, in press):

- rigor,
- multiple readings of the target text,
- academic discussion, and
- focus on text evidence.

When applied to close reading, rigor is a term that links features of the passage with how the reader interacts with the passage (Beers & Probst, 2012). Close reading rigor is determined by the complexity of texts as well as by the levels of engagement and commitment readers put into making sense of them. To read rigorously is to examine complex texts in a disciplined, dedicated, and thorough manner.

At the end of each unit, *Edge* provides texts and tasks for close reading that meet CCSS guidelines for grade-level complexity. They draw students into deep and thoughtful readings and rereadings. They are interesting and meaningful, contributing to rigorous study.

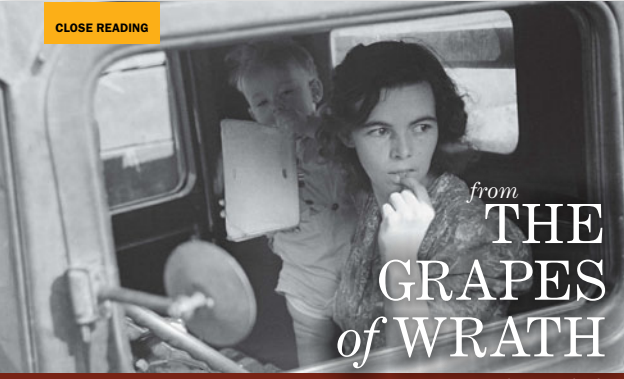
The program leads students through multiple readings of the target text by means of a Close Reading Routine. This routine involves a four-part spiraling analysis that is based on the CCSS for Reading strands, Key Ideas and Details, Craft and Structure, and Integration of Knowledge and Ideas. Readers are led to read and reread successively in order to:

- form initial understandings of the text,
- summarize the text,
- deepen their understandings while examining the author's use of text elements to shape understandings, and
- build knowledge.

Academic discussion permeates the program's Close Reading Routine. In preparation for summarizing selections, students compare the topic statements they compose and the important words they select. When time permits, they share and compare their summaries. As a class they synthesize the ways particular text elements shape the meaning of selections. Finally, they discuss the new ideas they generated while reading, and apply those ideas to the units' Essential Questions.

Focusing on text evidence is a key aspect of *Edge*. Of necessity readers use their knowledge and experience to make sense of authors' meanings (Pearson, 2012), but misunderstandings can arise when readers rely too much on what they bring to the text and substitute it for what authors actually presented. Consequently, the program consistently prompts students to ground their interpretations with wording from the text. All the reading selections in the program, including the ones for close reading, are accompanied by text-dependent questions that prompt students to directly engage authors' ideas and cite the evidence that supports their responses to the ideas.

CLOSE READING



From *Waiting in the Car with her husband across the auction, Okla. Times, 1936.* John Steichen, Photographic magazine, Library of Congress

from
THE
GRAPES
of WRATH

By John Steinbeck

Critical Viewing:
Mood What is the mood, or feeling, of this photograph? How did the photographer achieve the mood?

- 1 “...the road is full a them families goin’ west. Never seen so many. Gets worse all a time. Wonder where the hell they all come from?”
- 2 “Wonder where they all go to,” said Mae. “Come here for gas sometimes, but they don’t hardly never buy nothin’ else. People says they steal. We ain’t got nothin’ layin’ around. They never stole nothin’ from us.”
- 3 Big Bill, munching his pie, looked up the road through the screened window. “Better tie your stuff down. I think you got some of ‘em comin’ now.”
- 4 A 1926 Nash sedan pulled wearily off the highway. The back seat was piled nearly to the ceiling with sacks, with pots and pans, and on the very top, right up against the ceiling, two boys rode. On the top of the car, a mattress and a folded tent; tent poles tied along the running board. The car pulled up to the gas pumps. A dark-haired, hatchet-faced man got slowly out. And the two boys slid down from the load and hit the ground.

In Other Words
a them families goin’ of those families going ain’t got nothin’ layin’ don’t have anything lying
sedan medium-sized car

Historical Background
In the early 1930s, a drought hit the midwestern U.S. and farmers in the area lost all their crops. This area became known as the **Dust Bowl** because of the wind storms that swept dust over everything. Many families packed what little they had left and drove west to work in the fields of California.

90 Unit 1 Choices

Students annotate passages as they respond to text-dependent questions and discuss selections.

Strategy Instruction

As the CCSS put it, a full range of strategies may be needed for students to monitor and direct their comprehension. Whether they are reading to acquire new knowledge, to perform a task, or for pleasure, independent readers are strategic (McNamara, 2007). They take charge of what they read, adopting strategies that fit their selections and their reasons for reading. If something in a text is puzzling or confusing, independent readers realize this immediately, shift mental gears, and apply strategies to repair their understanding. Convincing research of effective secondary-school literacy programs confirms the need to teach students comprehension strategies (Langer, 2002).

Edge presents the following eight strategies known to promote students’ reading comprehension:

- **Plan:** Preview, set a purpose, and predict what you will meet in the text before reading it more carefully.
- **Monitor:** Notice confusing parts in the text then reread and make them clear.
- **Determine Importance:** Focus attention on the author’s most significant ideas and information.
- **Ask Questions:** Think actively by asking and answering questions about the text.
- **Visualize:** Imagine the sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch of what the author is telling.
- **Make Connections:** Combine your knowledge and experiences with the author’s ideas and information.
- **Make Inferences:** Use what you know to figure out what the author means but doesn’t say directly.
- **Synthesize:** Bring together ideas gained from texts and blend them into a new understanding.

Following the National Reading Panel’s (2000) findings, the program’s introductory lessons teach students to flexibly apply this set of eight strategies. The lessons focus students on orchestrating this repertoire, deliberately using multiple strategies to foster their understandings of texts. Each unit in the program then supplements this introduction by concentrating attention on a single strategy, an intervention that develops expertise and improves transfer across genres (Nokes & Dole, 2004).

Along with the eight comprehension strategies that fit all selections, *Edge* includes instruction in analyzing literary devices, text structures, and genres. These strategies enable readers to analyze authors’ organization of ideas (e.g., sequence, topic-detail, compare-contrast), purpose for writing (e.g., to tell a story, to explain, to convince), and genre-specific features (e.g., foreshadowing, symbolism, visual representations, testimonials). Text structure and genre strategies are especially important to teach because the ability to navigate textual arrangements as an aid to understanding and remembering is a robust characteristic of independent readers (Meyer, Wijekumar, Middlemiss, Higley, Lei, Meier, & Spielvogel, 2010; Kamil, 2012).

Conclusion

The reading comprehension instruction in *Edge* is best seen as a set of interactive elements that support one another. Engaging high school English learners and striving readers with content-rich texts at varying levels (independent, instructional, and complex) along with purposeful activities balances scaffolds and rigor to accelerate achievement and build resilient, engaged, literate graduates that can leverage literacy skills in school and beyond.