



## Developing Comprehension

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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.

### ***Inside Language, Literacy, and Content***

is designed to help middle grades 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, middle grades 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 non-fiction as complementary, each unit of ***Inside Language, Literacy, and Content*** includes a wealth of content-rich selections from both genres. Informational texts make up a significant portion of the reading materials. Reflecting the unit focus, these selections explore science and social studies topics, and they examine personal identity, loyalty, and other life issues. In addition, selections by authors such as Sandra Cisneros, Christopher Myers, Lensey Namioka, and Gary Soto permit students both to learn about other people and cultures and 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, ***Inside Language, Literacy, and Content*** 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 high level academic work. Consistent with research (Moje, 2007), the CCSS call for scaffolding learners' comprehension as needed.

***Inside Language, Literacy, and Content*** includes a wealth of instructional-level texts and texts for independent reading in addition to complex texts. The program includes appropriate scaffolds for English learners and striving readers to succeed with instructional, independent, and complex texts. Read alouds expose students to grade-level difficulty texts at the start of each unit. The accessible, content-rich

selections provided in each unit give students a running start that prepares 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. A digital library of videos and images helps build background and interest prior to reading. Preparation to read includes quickwrites, graphic organizers, and read-alouds. Glosses of unfamiliar words, text-dependent questions, prompts for students to think through what they have read before moving on, and post-reading discussion prompts support comprehension. Leveled Library and Content Library books are supported by complete online lesson plans and blackline masters for Student Journals.

### 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. 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 *Inside*. Each unit contains selections unified by a common theme such as “Decision Point” or “Making a Difference” to promote coherent inquiries. Each unit begins with a Guiding Question like “What makes an idea powerful?” or “How far will people go for the sake of freedom?” 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.

*Inside* 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 the texts' contents (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 middle grades 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 passages 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 readers' actions 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, *Inside Language, Literacy, and Content* provides texts and tasks for close reading that meet CCSS guidelines for grade-level complexity. These content-rich texts and purposeful tasks speak to middle grades youth. 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 content knowledge.

Academic discussion marks 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' Guiding Questions. Student generate their own questions through discussion and these texts provide an excellent opportunity for students to engage in short research projects relating to questions they generate.

Focusing on text evidence is a key aspect of *Inside Language, Literacy, and Content*. 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.

### 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).

*Inside Language, Literacy, and Content* 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 question 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, *Inside Language, Literacy, and Content* includes instruction in analyzing literary devices, analyzing specific text structures, and learning with and about a variety of 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).

The program's reading comprehension instruction also makes frequent use of Academic Language Frames and other structured supports (Dutro & Kinsella, 2010) to help English learners and striving readers internalize the reading comprehension processes that independent readers use habitually. Finally, it is important to note that the program presents strategies and scaffolds as helpful tools to be applied in the service of reading comprehension and knowledge building; strategies and scaffolds are no more than a means to the end goal of students getting the most of texts (Learned, Stockdill, & Moje, 2011).

### Conclusion

*Inside Language, Literacy, and Content*'s reading comprehension instruction is best seen as a set of interactive elements that support one another. Engaging middle school English learners and striving readers with content-rich, complex texts along with purposeful, close reading activities and teaching them how to comprehend enhance their college and career futures.

#### Reading Strategies

- Plan and Monitor
- Visualize
- Determine Importance
- Ask Questions
- Make Connections

#### Make Inferences

When the author does not say something directly, use what you know to figure out what the author means.

- Synthesize