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Implementing the Common Core
with Text-Dependent Questions

Research

Implementing the Common Core with Text-Dependent Questions

INTRODUCTION

As a result of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy, much has been said about the necessity for college-ready students to use specific evidence in their responses to a text and to understand what type of evidence is necessary to reflect a nuanced understanding of a text. Most educators readily support this requirement and can give a nod to the standards that take aim at these skills. However, for many it may be less clear *how* to elicit responses from students that both show this nuanced understanding and locate the appropriate kinds of evidence. Asking text-dependent questions (TDQs) that engage students in an analytic and engaging way is a skill in and of itself, and one that educators must hone.

> *Students who are college and career ready in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language . . . they value evidence.*
>
> *Students cite specific evidence when offering an oral or written interpretation of a text. They use relevant evidence when supporting their own points in writing and speaking, making their reasoning clear to the reader or listener, and they constructively evaluate others' use of evidence.*
>
> *—The Common Core State Standards "Habits of Mind"*

This white paper will address the following questions:

• What do good TDQs look like?

• Are some TDQs better to ask than others?

• What is a logical progression of TDQs for one text?

• Do TDQs for fiction and literary nonfiction look different than those for informational text?

• Is it okay to ask students to engage personally with text? (What happened to text-to-self responses?) Can I use TDQs to do this?

• How do I help students to recognize what the right amount and kind of evidence looks like?

• As a supervisor, what should I be looking for during a lesson that uses TDQs?

What do good text-dependent questions look like?

First and foremost, a good TDQ requires that students have read the text and do not need to access outside sources. (An exception, of course, is when the TDQ requires a comparison of two or more texts or a juxtaposition of the text to another argument or opinion.) I, and other professional developers, highly recommend beginning with short texts (Boyles, 2012/2013; Silver, Perini and Dewing, 2012). Second, a good TDQ helps build a strong conceptual understanding of a text and requires that students ultimately go beyond simple, factual recall (Fisher and Frey, 2012). Third, a good TDQ cues students to cite a word, phrase, or passage from the text in order to support their response and to explain its significance to the text in their own words. Finally, all good TDQs are appropriate to the reading level of the students and both challenge and support their understanding of the text. For example, third-graders and twelfth-graders can both read fairy tales, but for different purposes. It is important to consider the level of analysis we want our students to achieve when we create TDQs.

For example, students might be asked to create a chart of evidence and analyze what the evidence signifies: (*Measuring Up to the Common Core: English Language Arts Level D,* 2013, p.60).

Details from the text about how the [character feels]	What I already know	My inferences about how the [character feels]

Are some text-dependent questions better to ask than others?

Good TDQs not only support and help students build a nuanced and complex understanding of a text but also enable effective formative assessment in the classroom. How students respond to a question should tell teachers where students are struggling and where they are succeeding in comprehending and analyzing a text. For example, well-developed, thoughtful TDQs will linger on vocabulary, syntax where arguments or plots are developed, and imagery or allusions that illustrate the author's main point (Achievethecore.org, 2012). Teachers should be able to read or hear in their students' responses exactly where in the text their understanding is faltering or where their analysis is developing soundly. For example, in these guided reading questions for a short passage about "The Second Labor of Hercules," students are asked to examine the development of the story (*Measuring Up to the Common Core: English Language Arts Level D,* 2013): p.76).

The second of Hercules' 12 impossible tasks was to kill the Hydra, a poisonous water beast with seven heads. If any of her heads were cut off, she grew two more.

Bravely, Hercules dove into the lake where the Hydra lived, covering his mouth with a cloth to keep from tasting the poison. At the entrance to the Underworld he found the Hydra. With his sword he cut off each head, dipping the sword in the Hydra's poison and rubbing it on each neck so no new heads would grow. One of the Hydra's heads was immortal, though. This head he placed under a rock, and there it lies still.

• What words in the first paragraph tell you that Hercules can do heroic things?

• What is the setting? How does the setting make the conflict with the Hydra sound even more frightening?

• What character traits help Hercules overcome the Hydra?

• What event does the last sentence of the story suggest could happen?

From these questions a teacher can assess what aspects of the passage students comprehend or struggle with and, in particular, which concepts related to story development may need reinforcing. Similarly, teachers can assess students' ability to make inferences, a higher-order thinking skill.

What is a logical progression of text-dependent questions for one text?

Given any one text, two teachers will, no doubt, develop a variety of different questions depending on the purpose established for reading the text and the readiness with which students approach the text. Carefully constructed TDQs support differentiated instruction; they can bring struggling readers to a more sophisticated understanding of the text, and they can challenge stronger readers to think more critically about the text. Creating a coherent sequence of TDQs can help students stay focused on the text and bring them to a solid understanding of the text (Achievethecore.org, 2012). One way to approach the task of developing a logical progression of TDQs is to consider a taxonomy of questions that helps students arrive at a desired level of understanding in a logical fashion.

The Revised Bloom's Taxonomy creates a framework for designing this progression from a factual to a conceptual to a procedural to a meta-cognitive understanding (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). TDQs based on this taxonomy cue students to locate and explain in their own words the following understandings:

• *factual*—words, details, and phrases that help construct a basic understanding of the text

• *conceptual*—words, details, and phrases that develop an understanding of the text's purpose and the ideas within it

• *procedural*—sentences and larger passages that reveal the structure and organization of the text to create a sense of its overall development

• *meta-cognitive*—sentences and larger passages that are critical in comparison to other texts, to outside ideas, and to personal interaction with the text

Another way to develop a progression of TDQs is to consider Doug Fisher and Nancy Frey's *Progression of Text-Dependent Questions* (Fisher & Frey, 2012).
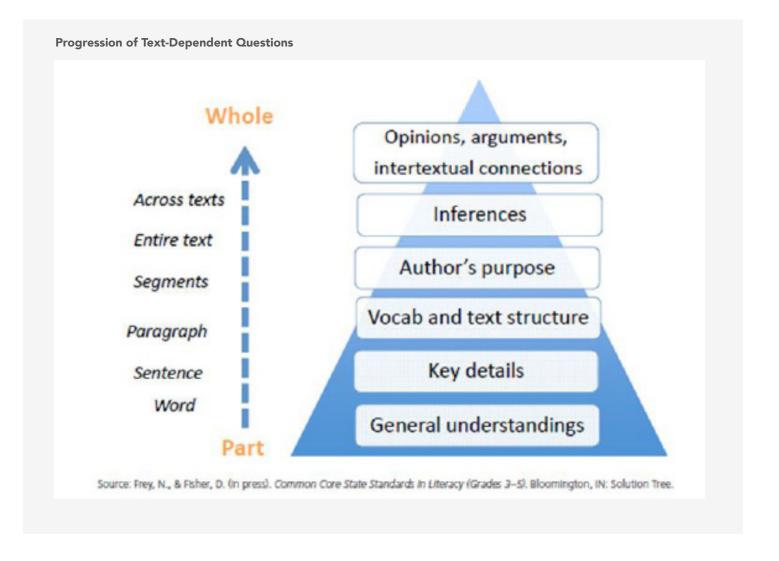
With both Fisher and Frey's *Progression of Text-Dependent Questions* and the *Revised Bloom's Taxonomy,* teachers can prompt students first to locate and analyze smaller portions of text and then to work with longer portions that develop larger ideas and understandings. Fisher and Frey's hierarchy also indicates the frequency of question type (more questions should be directed at *general understandings* and fewer at *intertextual connections*). Finally, Fisher and Frey add the caveat that this hierarchy is not intended to be a rigid taxonomy, and that teachers might choose not to follow this exact progression depending on their purposes or their students' initial understandings (Fisher and Frey, 2012).

> *Students who are college and career ready in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language . . . they respond to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline.*
>
> *Students adapt their communication in relation to audience, task, purpose, and discipline. They set and adjust purpose for reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language use as warranted by the task. They appreciate nuances, such as how the composition of an audience should affect tone when speaking and how the connotations of words affect meaning. They also know that different disciplines call for different types of evidence (e.g., documentary evidence in history, experimental evidence in science).*

Progression of Text-Dependent Questions

Source: Frey, N., & Fisher, D. (in press). *Common Core State Standards in Literacy (Grades 3–5).* Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

for an excerpt of Alfred Noyes's poem "The Highwayman" ask students to examine images stanza by stanza and ultimately to discuss the significance of a stanza and the organization of the poem as a whole (*Measuring Up® to the Common Core: English Language Arts Level D*, 2013, p.123-124).

From The Highwayman by Alfred Noyes

The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees,
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,
The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
And the highwayman came riding—
Riding—riding—
The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn door.

He'd a French cocked hat on his forehead, a bunch of lace at his chin,
A coat of the claret velvet, and breeches of brown doe-skin;
They fitted with never a wrinkle: his boots were up to the thigh!
And he rode with a jeweled twinkle,
His pistol butts a-twinkle—
His rapier hilts a-twinkle, under the jeweled sky.

Over the cobbles he clattered and clashed in the dark inn-yard,
And he tapped with his whip on the shutters, but all was locked and barred;
He whistled a tune to the window, and who should be waiting there
But the landlord's black-eyed daughter,
Bess, the landlord's daughter,
Plaiting a dark red love-knot into her long black hair.

Guided Questions

• What images or ideas does the first stanza focus on?
• What impression does it create in your mind?
• What images or ideas does the second stanza focus on?
• What impression does it create in your mind?

Following Activities:

1. What images or ideas does the third stanza focus on?
2. Think about your answer to the previous question and the ones in the margins of the poem.
   Describe the relationship between stanzas and ideas or images.
3. In your own words, describe what a stanza is. How can you tell where one stanza ends and the next one begins?
4. What can you guess about the organization of the poem based on the first three stanzas? What happens in these stanzas?
5. What do scenes, paragraphs and sections, and stanzas have in common?

Do text-dependent questions for fiction and literary nonfiction look different than those for informational text?

Consideration of genre is another helpful lens when designing TDQs. Fiction and literary nonfiction lend themselves to prioritizing an awareness and an understanding of the craft in a way that is not always as essential for informational text. In "Closing in on Close Reading," Nancy Boyles provides some thoughtful prompts for TDQs relevant to the writer's craft. For example, she suggests the following questions for imagery (Boyles, 2012/2013):

- *What is being compared?*

- *Why is the comparison effective? (typically because of the clear, strong, or unusual connection between the two)*

- *What symbols are present? Why did the author choose these symbols?*

While it is also relevant to attend to tone and voice, word choice, and sentence structure in an informational text, these areas of focus are critical for fiction, literary nonfiction, and poetry. TDQs for informational text tend to aim at the development of the argument or presentation of factual information. In Achieve's "Guide to Creating TDQ's for Close Analytic Reading," the writers offer the following suggestions that are particularly relevant for informational text (Achievethecore.org, 2012):

- *Probe each argument in persuasive text, each idea in informational text, each key detail in literary text, and observe how these build to a whole.*

- *Examine how shifts in the direction of an argument or explanation are achieved and the impact of those shifts.*

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standard for Writing

Text Types and Purposes
Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

For example, in response to an informational text, teachers might ask students a variety of analytic questions that focus on the information conveyed (*Measuring Up to the Common Core: English Language Arts Level G,* 2013, p.105-106).

- What is the author's assertion in this passage?

- What type of evidence does the author present to support his or her argument?

- How would you analyze the theme and development of this passage?

- Is the author's argument sufficiently supported? Explain your answer.

- What added evidence and discussion do you think would strengthen the author's argument?

Both genres of text require attention to small parts as well as the text as a whole. And, as students become more critical readers of complex questions, they will become adept at making inferences and comparing information in one text to outside information.

Is it okay to ask students to engage personally with text? (What happened to text-to-self responses?) Can I use TDQs to do this?

Personal response to text has fallen out of favor with the new Common Core State Standards largely because students often are able to respond to such questions without having read the text at all. However, some personal responses require both a solid conceptual understanding of the text and textual evidence in the response and, thus, are not without value.

For example, after reading either a literary or informational text, Fisher and Frey (2012) suggest students might be prompted to do the following: "On your own sheet of paper, write an opinion or idea about the passage. Then explain why you feel the way you do. Be sure to use support from the passage for your ideas. Then compare your responses with the responses of a small group of classmates. Explore where and why you agree and disagree. Come to a consensus."

Fisher and Frey do not discount the benefit of asking a good personal question but caution that reader response questions are often asked too soon in the sequence of questioning. Personal

response questions can develop students' interest in the material, should be analytical, and should prompt students to include textual evidence to support their response.

How do I help students to recognize what the right amount and kind of evidence looks like?

First and foremost, teachers must model appropriate responses to TDQs. These model responses should be concise and sparing with the amount of evidence they include and should provide sufficient reasoning for selecting the evidence. Using short texts lends itself to both modeling responses and supporting students as they begin to develop their own responses.

There are two pitfalls that teachers should be aware of for students of any age who are developing the skill of responding to TDQs. First, inexperienced students—even those with strong reading skills—often choose too large a chunk of text to include in a response. Prompting students to select just a word, phrase, or sentence is one way around this pitfall. Another way is for teachers to model how one might select just the right portion of text to include. And, for advanced students, teachers can model how to use ellipses to omit nonessential portions of the text. Second, inexperienced students often fail to explain their selection thoroughly and assume that the selection is self-explanatory. Students should be cued in the TDQ to include their explanation and reasoning behind their choice.

For example, when teaching literary allusions, teachers might ask the following sequence of questions (*Measuring Up to the Common Core: English Language Arts Level D,* 2013, p.94):

> 1. What allusion does the writer make?
>
> 2. To what does the allusion refer?
>
> 3. What effect does the allusion have?

Note that the first question requires specific evidence; the second question requires analysis. And the third question requires explanation of the evidence.

As a supervisor, what should I be looking for during a lesson that uses text-dependent questions?

Initially, teachers should provide their students with models and supports to guide them as they transition to the text-dependent response. Supervisors should look for how teachers model using short texts at an appropriate reading level for the students. As students become more adept at answering TDQs, teachers should also model close reading skills and responses to more complex text. As TDQs move up the taxonomy and require significant critical thinking skills, teachers will need to provide guidance once again. Even the most sophisticated high school students need to see models of intertextual comparisons using textual evidence.

> *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standard for Speaking and Listening*
>
> *Comprehension and Collaboration*
> 2. *Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.*
>
> *Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas*
> 4. *Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.*

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The important take-away from this discussion, for both teachers and administrators, is the significance of the text within the lesson. The text should be at the heart of all learning experiences—reading, writing, listening, and speaking. This is true for ELA, science, social studies, history, and all other academic classes. The new Common Core State Standards emphasize the significance of texts in order for students to be better prepared for both college and career. Students need to become stronger interpreters of fiction and informational text, and they need to be able to present their understandings using evidence in a clear and thoughtful manner. Responding to text-dependent questions is a critical step in the development of these skills. Finally, as students become more adept at answering these questions, the ultimate goal should be to have students create their own TDQs at all levels of the taxonomy. Once students are asking their own questions rooted within the text, they will become more independent thinkers and interpreters of all that they read.

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