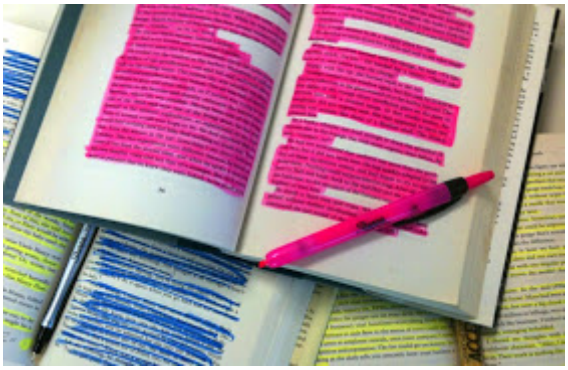
Five close reading strategies to support the Common Core

1 I walked in to my first college class, Political Science 101, eager to learn. For my inaugural college assignment, my professor asked the class to read the first three chapters of the textbook for the next class period. That night, I returned to my dorm room, determined to learn everything I could in those three chapters. I pulled out my textbook and highlighter. Growing up, that is what I always saw the "older kids" using when they read a textbook, In my naïve 18-year-old mind, I believed that highlighters must have some magical power that transports the words on the page directly to your brain. I assumed that if I just figured out the right words to highlight, then it would be easy for me to remember what I read.

2 However, when I opened my textbook it was unlike anything I had read in high school. Where were the pictures? Where were the definitions for words in the margins? Where was the chapter summary at the end of each chapter? All of the things I relied on in high school to get me through a text were missing.

3 I shrugged, pulled out my highlighter and started highlighting. That is what college kids did to study…right? But, what was I supposed to highlight? The bold words? The headings? "Important" information? I wasn't sure. I started highlighting everything that looked important on the page. Before long, the page looked something like this:



4 I quickly realized that I had no real game plan for reading this complicated textbook. I didn't know what to highlight or how to find the important information to study. The text simply overwhelmed me.

5 Flash forward to my first few years of teaching. I taught senior English, and I was determined to provide my students help when it came to annotating texts. We practiced annotations throughout the year, and my instructions went something like: “Mark it up! Underline important information! Write in the margins!”

6 While this method may have been slightly more effective than what I used that first day of college, it was still too vague and ambiguous for my students. They had no direction for reading, especially when it was a complicated text they did not understand.

7 Last fall, I attended an AVID workshop about critical reading strategies. To be honest, it completely changed the way I teach reading. I learned many simple strategies to help my students attack a text. After the conference, our department began adapting the strategies to all of the types of texts that we teach. Here are five simple strategies to help teach students how to critically read complex texts. The best part? Highlighters are not required.

1. Number the paragraphs.

8 The Common Core asks students to be able to cite and refer to the text. One simple way to do this is by numbering each paragraph, section or stanza in the left hand margin. When students refer to the text, I require them to state which paragraph they are referring to. The rest of the class will be able to quickly find the line being referred to.

2. Chunk the Text

9 When faced with a full page of text, reading it can quickly become overwhelming for students. Breaking up the text into smaller sections (or chunks) makes the page much more manageable for students. Students do this by drawing a horizontal line between paragraphs to divide the page into smaller sections.

10 At the beginning of the year, I group the paragraphs into chunks before I hand out the assignment. In the directions I will say, “Chunk paragraphs 1-3, 4-5, 6-8, 9-12.” I look at the paragraphs to see where natural chunks occur. Paragraphs 1-3 may be the hook and thesis statement, while 6-8 may be the paragraphs where the author addresses the opposition. It is important to understand that there is no right or wrong way to chunk the text, as long as you can justify why you grouped certain paragraphs together.

11 By the end of the year, I begin to let go of that responsibility and ask my students to chunk the text on their own. They number the paragraphs then must make decisions about what paragraphs will be grouped together. Usually, most of the class is very similar in the way they chunked the text.

3. Underline and circle…with a purpose.

12 Telling students to simply underline “the important stuff” is too vague. “Stuff” is not a concrete thing that students can identify. Instead, direct students to underline and circle very specific things. Think about what information you want students to take from the text, and ask them to look for those elements. What you have students circle and underline may change depending on the text type.

13 For example, when studying an argument, ask students to underline “claims”. We identify claims as belief statements that the author is making. Students will quickly discover that the author makes multiple claims throughout the argument.

14 When studying poetry, students could underline the imagery they find throughout the poem. Circling specific items is also an effective close reading strategy. I often have my students circle “Key terms” in the text. I define key terms as words that: 1. Are defined. 2. Are repeated throughout the text. 3. If you only circled five key terms in the entire text, you would have a pretty good idea about what the entire text is about. I have also asked students to circle the names of sources, power verbs, or figurative language.

15 Providing students with a specific thing you want them to underline or circle will focus their attention on that area much better than “underlining important information”.

4. Left margin: What is the author SAYING?

16 It isn’t enough to ask students to “write in the margins”. We must be very specific and give students a game plan for what they will write. This is where the chunking comes into play.

17 In the left margin, I ask my students to summarize each chunk. I demonstrate how to write summaries in 10-words or less. The chunking allows the students to look at the text in smaller segments and summarize what the author is saying in just that small, specific chunk.

5. Right margin: Dig deeper into the text.

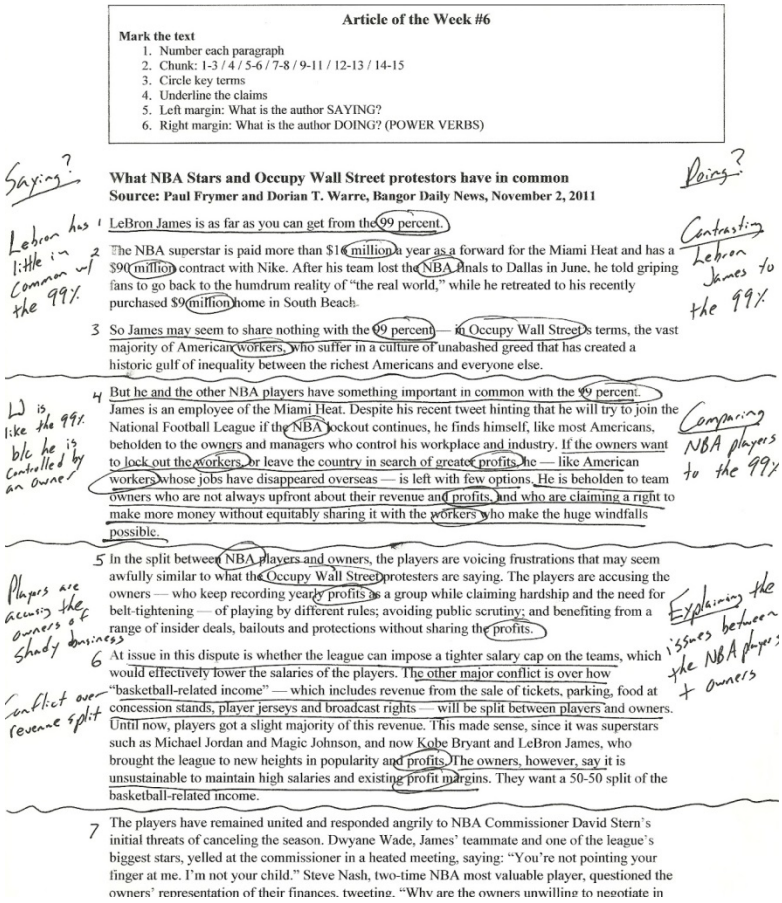
18 In the right-hand margin, I again direct my students to complete a specific task for each chunk. This may include: Use a power verb to describe what the author is DOING. (For example: Describing, illustrating, arguing, etc.) Note: It isn’t enough for students to write “Comparing” and be done. What is the author comparing? A better answer might be: ”Comparing the character of Montag to Captain Beatty.”

19 Represent the information with a picture. This is a good way for students to be creative to visually represent the chunk with a drawing.

20 Ask questions. I have found this to be a struggle for many students, as they often say they don’t have any questions to ask. When modeled, students can begin to learn how to ask questions that dig deeper into the text. I often use these questions as the conversation drive in Socratic Seminar.

21 There are many other things students can write in the margins. However, we must model and teach these strategies so that students will have an idea of what to write when they are on their own.

Here is what a completed Article of the Week might look like after a student has performed a close read of it:



Article of the Week #6

Mark the text

1. Number each paragraph
2. Chunk: 1-3 / 4 / 5-6 / 7-8 / 9-11 / 12-13 / 14-15
3. Circle key terms
4. Underline the claims
5. Left margin: What is the author SAYING?
6. Right margin: What is the author DOING? (POWER VERBS)

Saying? Doing?

What NBA Stars and Occupy Wall Street protestors have in common

Source: Paul Frymer and Dorian T. Warre, Bangor Daily News, November 2, 2011

Lebron has little in common w/ the 99%

1 LeBron James is as far as you can get from the 99 percent.

2 The NBA superstar is paid more than $16 million a year as a forward for the Miami Heat and has a $90 million contract with Nike. After his team lost the NBA finals to Dallas in June, he told griping fans to go back to the humdrum reality of "the real world," while he retreated to his recently purchased $9 million home in South Beach.

Contrasting Lebron James to the 99%

3 So James may seem to share nothing with the 99 percent — in Occupy Wall Street's terms, the vast majority of American workers, who suffer in a culture of unabashed greed that has created a historic gulf of inequality between the richest Americans and everyone else.

22

LJ is like the 99% b/c he is controlled by an owner

4 But he and the other NBA players have something important in common with the 99 percent. James is an employee of the Miami Heat. Despite his recent tweet hinting that he will try to join the National Football League if the NBA lockout continues, he finds himself, like most Americans, beholden to the owners and managers who control his workplace and industry. If the owners want to lock out the workers, or leave the country in search of greater profits, he — like American workers whose jobs have disappeared overseas — is left with few options. He is beholden to team owners who are not always upfront about their revenue and profits, and who are claiming a right to make more money without equitably sharing it with the workers who make the huge windfalls possible.

Comparing NBA players to the 99%

Players are accusing the owners of shady business

5 In the split between NBA players and owners, the players are voicing frustrations that may seem awfully similar to what the Occupy Wall Street protesters are saying. The players are accusing the owners — who keep recording yearly profits as a group while claiming hardship and the need for belt-tightening — of playing by different rules; avoiding public scrutiny; and benefiting from a range of insider deals, bailouts and protections without sharing the profits.

Explaining the issues between the NBA players + owners

6 At issue in this dispute is whether the league can impose a tighter salary cap on the teams, which would effectively lower the salaries of the players. The other major conflict is over how "basketball-related income" — which includes revenue from the sale of tickets, parking, food at concession stands, player jerseys and broadcast rights — will be split between players and owners. Until now, players got a slight majority of this revenue. This made sense, since it was superstars such as Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson, and now Kobe Bryant and LeBron James, who brought the league to new heights in popularity and profits. The owners, however, say it is unsustainable to maintain high salaries and existing profit margins. They want a 50-50 split of the basketball-related income.

Conflict over revenue split

7 The players have remained united and responded angrily to NBA Commissioner David Stern's initial threats of canceling the season. Dwyane Wade, James' teammate and one of the league's biggest stars, yelled at the commissioner in a heated meeting, saying: "You're not pointing your finger at me. I'm not your child." Steve Nash, two-time NBA most valuable player, questioned the owners' representation of their finances, tweeting, "Why are the owners unwilling to negotiate in

23

To ensure our students are college and career ready, we must teach them critical reading strategies in order for them to independently attack a text. They must learn how to own a text, rather than letting the text own them. After following these steps, students have read the text at least five times and they are actively interacting with the text. This is a much different experience than skimming through a text one time with a highlighter in hand. What strategies do you teach students in order for them to critically read complex texts?