

# ENGAGING CHILDREN IN CLOSE READING

## Multimodal Commentaries and Illustration Remix

*Bridget Dalton*

Inferencing is said to be the engine of comprehension (Duffy, 2009). It's where the action happens when we read. We connect what we know with the information in the text to construct our understanding. We "read between the lines," filling in the gaps between what is explicitly stated in the text and what we can infer, based on our background knowledge, experiences, values, and beliefs. We make sense of the text as we connect information across sentences and passages to build a coherent model of the situation or concept. Always, we read in a particular social context and for a purpose.

Do you recall the story of *The Little Red Hen*? Nowhere in the story does it say the little hen is a hard worker. Yet even very young children understand this about the hen, because the text says that she plants the seeds, cuts the wheat, grinds the flour, and bakes the bread—and all by herself! The illustrations reveal even more about the animals' personalities and the difference between the busy little hen and her farmyard friends.

Children also tend to understand why the little red hen chooses not to share her bread with the animals who wouldn't help, although they might not agree with her decision! Drawing on their own experiences of fairness and, perhaps, kindness, some children will decide that the little red hen should have shared her

bread. After all, maybe the animals were hungry and maybe they will share with the little red hen in the future! Whether you're reading *The Little Red Hen* or Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, inferencing remains the engine of the comprehension process. In Louise Rosenblatt's terms, there is always a transaction between the reader and the text, with the text serving as the evocation for the reader's response (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995).

As text complexity increases, so do the inferencing demands. By the time children enter fourth grade, they are reading literature and nonfiction that requires deeper levels of background knowledge across disciplines, increased use of academic language, and flexibility in abstract and figurative thinking (for a review of research on comprehension, see Duke & Carlisle, 2011).

The Common Core State Standards' (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) emphasis on analytic reading and the use of text-based evidence to develop interpretations and make arguments has

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resulted in renewed attention to “close reading” of challenging texts. The focus on close reading has caused many of us to reflect on how we teach children to respond to and analyze text. Especially for elementary-grade children, how do we support them in developing their ability to closely examine text to develop nuanced understandings and arguments?

In this piece, I share a technology-based strategy, multimodal hypertext commentary and remix, designed to teach children how to engage in close reading of text. It draws on familiar text analysis practices while offering opportunities for engagement and learning. As you read or skim this column, think about how this might work with your children, your curriculum. Are there points of connection that you can build on and strategies you can try out and adapt?

## What Is Close Reading and How Do You Do It?

In the broadest sense, close reading is a focused rereading of a text in which you go beyond a basic understanding of the text. It may involve a passage or key quotation from a text or an entire text, depending on the length. We may reread with a general purpose, such as trying to analyze how the author uses language to evoke an emotional response.

For example, recall Mem Fox’s use of the refrain, “Oh, Kaola Lou, I do love you!” in her memorable tale of a young koala who feels neglected by her busy mother, or Sharon Creech’s rhythmic prose poetry that echoes the sound of running in her middle-grades novel, *Heartbeat*. Often, we have a text-specific purpose for engaging in close reading. After reading *The Great Kapok Tree* by Lynn Cherry, the purpose might be to reread the text to gather evidence that supports or disconfirms the view that

*“Multimodal hypertext commentary and remix...draws on familiar text analysis practices while offering opportunities for engagement and learning.”*

Lynn Cherry is an environmentalist who wants to save the rain forest.

When engaged in close reading of a picture book, readers will examine the illustrations as carefully as the text, considering both content and design elements such as color, line, texture, layout, and media (see Jon Callow’s [2008] wonderful article in *The Reading Teacher* about visual literacy assessment to learn more about how to teach “close viewing”). For nonfiction texts, the integration of textual and graphic information is especially important, because the graphics often carry a heavy content load.

Some make a distinction between text comprehension and close reading. I find it useful to think of them as layers of comprehension that intersect and interact. It makes sense to read first to understand and then again (and perhaps again!) to interrogate the text and develop a deeper appreciation of the text’s meaning, how it is crafted, and what relevance it holds for us in our personal lives and beyond to our community and world. However, I don’t think this means that you have to spend a lot of time understanding the text before engaging in close reading.

As students reread, they continue to develop their understanding of the text while they are also bringing more sophisticated analytic skills to bear. A good example of this process is demonstrated in the Question the Author strategy, which helps students to both understand the text and develop a

critical reading stance (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1997). I envision the reader’s understanding of a text as a weaving that begins as a loosely woven basic weave and then develops into an artistic statement with embellishments, intricate patterns, and exotic and hand-crafted fibers. The pattern may have stretches of basic weave here and there, juxtaposed with flights of weaving artistry to result in a final interesting and beautiful piece.

When engaged in close reading, children often begin by rereading the text or passage and making notes in the margin (sticky notes are good for this) or in their learning logs. Termed *text annotations* or *explications*, this highlighting and thinking about specific words, phrases, and passages prepares readers to use text-based evidence in their discussions and writings about the text. Often, the teacher provides text-dependent questions to guide students through a close reading.

For example, the Achieve the Core website provides several exemplar lesson plans for close reading ([www.achievethecore.org/steal-these-tools/close-reading-exemplars](http://www.achievethecore.org/steal-these-tools/close-reading-exemplars)). In Jim Murphy’s lessons for an informational text about *The Great Fire*, he leads students through three days of close reading, beginning with questions about why the author opens the text the way he does, the importance of the author’s focus on a detail such as hay in the barn, and what it is the

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author wants the reader to understand about Sullivan’s character. Timothy Shanahan (2013) offers excellent advice about how to develop comprehension and close reading in his blog ([www.shanahanonliteracy.com/2012/06/what-is-close-reading.html](http://www.shanahanonliteracy.com/2012/06/what-is-close-reading.html)).

Close reading and discussion go hand in hand. It is through talk that students’ arguments and responses are presented, contested, and refined. Peer-led conversations, as well as teacher-guided conversations, are important vehicles for developing this kind of high-level thinking with text, as well as engendering student interest and engagement in the text, the topic or question, and each other. To learn more about high-quality talk, visit Wilkinson and Soter’s website at [www.quality-talk.org](http://www.quality-talk.org).

### **Integrating Technology, Inferencing, and Close Reading: Hypertext Commentary and Illustration Remix**

A few years ago, I asked students in my graduate literacy courses to collaborate with a child on composing a multimodal response to literature. Several chose to have their “reading buddy” select a quote or illustration from their books that they wanted to explore more deeply. Using PowerPoint as their multimodal hypertext environment, students hyperlinked from their text passage slide to a second slide presenting their written explanation, personal connection, or critique. In some cases, students audio recorded their thoughts

and inserted graphics to reinforce their message. Some chose to add dialogue to an illustration from the text. The resulting hypertexts were inspiring. Whether a struggling reader or an avid reader, children became invested in this alternative approach to exploring text meaning and creatively expressing it with a multimodal hypertext authoring tool.

I continue to explore this type of multimodal hypertext connection to close reading. In the remainder of this column, I present an example using a public domain version of “The Lion and the Mouse” from *Aesop’s Fables (The Aesop for Children)*, with pictures by Milo Winter, found here as part of the Project Gutenberg e-book: [www.gutenberg.org/files/19994/19994-h/19994-h.htm](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/19994/19994-h/19994-h.htm).

### **Choose a Text Worthy of Close Reading (and That Has Some Illustrations)**

It’s helpful to choose a book to use for modeling purposes that you can try out together, before children work with other texts. I like to start with appealing children’s literature, because I know students will be willing to spend some extended time with the text. Although I might start with fiction, the goal is to have students become equally successful with fiction and nonfiction.

I also choose a text with some illustrations, whether a picture book or an illustrated book, such as E.B. White’s *Stuart Little* or Jeff Kinney’s *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. The illustrations are important for two reasons. First, children typically enjoy looking closely at illustrations, which is not always the case when asked to reread and closely examine text. Second, the illustrations can be scanned and saved as an image that students will later use to express their understanding and analysis of the text through added speech and inner-thought balloons.

For this example, I chose “The Lion and the Mouse.” I’ve loved Aesop’s fables since I was a little girl, and this is one of my favorites, with its message that “the little can help the strong” and that we should be kind to one another. Fables are commonly read in elementary school classrooms, and there are many versions available in print and online. They are also—by their very nature—short texts. This is important when students are learning how to create a hypertext and engage in close reading.

### **Create a Base Digital Text (or Text Excerpt) and Illustrations**

I use PowerPoint as my multimodal hypertext composing tool (any similar program will work, as long as it allows you to hyperlink screens). Because the text needs to be in a digital format, you may either select from the numerous digital texts and e-books available on the Internet or type selected quotes or passage(s) into a digital document and

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scan in an illustration (remember to include the reference citation).

For illustrations, try searching on the book title under Google Images to find one or more illustrations from the book that you can save as an image file (reference the image, as well).

Remember, it is beneficial to include a graphic from the text you are reading, because a major goal of close reading is to explore the meaning and author's and illustrator's craft of a particular text.

I always save my text and image files so that I have clean originals to use again,

if needed. Once you have pasted or typed the text into the PowerPoint slides, and inserted an image, you now have the base text. This base text will be transformed into a hypertext when students extend it with their links to commentary and illustration remixes (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1 PowerPoint Hypertext Commentary

<p>Hyperlinked version of slide 1, with underlined hyperlinks for two sentences in the story.</p>	<p>Hyperlink 1 is linked to this slide with written, visual, and audio commentary. The arrow in the bottom corner returns to slide 1.</p>
<div data-bbox="102 1003 746 1444" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px;"> <h3 style="text-align: center;">The Lion and the Mouse by Aesop</h3> <p>A Lion lay asleep in the forest, his great head resting on his paws. <u>A timid little Mouse came upon him unexpectedly, and in her fright and haste to get away, ran across the Lion's nose. (1)</u> Roused from his nap, the Lion laid his huge paw angrily on the tiny creature to kill her.</p> <p>"Spare me!" begged the poor Mouse. "Please let me go and some day I will surely repay you."</p> <p><u>The Lion was much amused to think that a Mouse could ever help him. (2)</u> But he was generous and finally let the Mouse go.</p> </div>	<div data-bbox="772 758 1453 1272" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px;"> <h3 style="text-align: center;">(1) Mouse has a problem</h3> <p style="text-align: right;">Audio </p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The mouse sees the lion sleeping and is so scared that she runs right across his nose and wakes him up.</li> <li>• I think the author wants to show how tiny the mouse is by having her run across the lion's nose.</li> <li>• Sometimes when you have a lot of pressure on you, you do stupid things!</li> </ul> <div style="display: flex; align-items: center;">  <div style="margin-left: 10px;"> <p style="font-size: small;">These photos show how tiny a mouse is and why it would be frightened by a lion, the biggest cat there is!</p>  </div> </div> </div>
	<p>Hyperlink 2 illustrates inferencing skill and analysis of author's craft.</p>
	<div data-bbox="772 1373 1453 1877" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px;"> <h3 style="text-align: center;">(2) The lion is king of the jungle</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The lion is strong and could crush the little mouse with one paw. He thinks it's funny that a tiny mouse would say she could help him in the future.</li> <li>• I think the author makes the lion laugh to show he has power over the mouse. What could a little mouse ever do for the mighty king of the jungle?</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: right;">Audio  </p> </div>

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Figure 2 Students Create Character “Thoughts” and “Saying” Links and Compose Illustration Commentary

Hyperlinked version of slide 2	Inner thought hyperlink
 <p>Some days later, while stalking his prey in the forest, the Lion was caught in the ropes of a hunter's net. Unable to free himself, he filled the forest with his angry roaring.</p> <p>The Mouse knew the voice and quickly found the Lion struggling in the net.</p> <p><i>Click to hear what the animals are saying and thinking.</i></p> <p>Running to one of the great ropes that bound him, she gnawed it until it parted, and soon the Lion was free.</p> <p>"You laughed when I said I would repay you," said the Mouse. "Now you see that even a Mouse can help a Lion."</p>	<p>Inner thought hyperlink</p>
Illustration commentary	Dialogue hyperlink, with expressive audio-narration
<p>Illustrator's design (Milo Winter)</p>  <p>The lion is hunched over with a sad, worried expression on his face. He is staring at the mouse. He is hoping that the mouse will save him.</p> <p>The size and position of the lion and mouse show the difference in power. Although mouse is tiny, she is taking action – gnawing the rope – while the lion is helpless in the trap.</p> <p>The colors are kind of sad and serious, just like this part of the story.</p>	<p>Dialogue hyperlink, with expressive audio-narration</p>

### Encourage Multimodal Expression

This hypertext strategy invites students' multimodal expression. In addition to writing their hyperlinked commentaries and speech and inner-thought balloons, students may use other modes to communicate with their audience. For example, they may audio record the

characters' speech and thought balloons. This encourages students to dramatically convey the character, something that authentically rests on their close reading and understanding of the characters, plot, and tone of the story. PowerPoint has a simple audio-record tool (you may need a microphone if your computer does not pick up sound well) and tools for

inserting graphics, sound effects, or video clips to explain, make an argument, or reinforce the emotion of a piece.

### Create Hyperlinked Commentary and Illustration Remixes

To heighten students' interest and give them some ownership of the process,

*“Some students will find it easier to express themselves orally, and some will appreciate being able to listen and learn through the oral narration.”*

I focus on two kinds of response: (1) hyperlinked commentary, or explication, of a particular segment of text (this could be at the word, phrase or sentence level, or a larger chunk of text); and (2) illustration remix with the addition of either thought balloons or speech balloons showing what the characters are thinking and feeling.

Both types of elaborations require students to reread at least a section of the text, make observations about what they think the author is saying (and why), and express their understanding in their hyperlinked commentary or illustration remix. The hypertext is presented as one of exploration and investigation of the text, rather than a response to teacher-provided questions about the text (although you will want to model your own questions and commentary for students so that they see possibilities for their own exploration). Students can choose the text segment that they want to “unpack,” combining text evidence with what they know to create their commentary or illustration remix.

#### **Hyperlinked Text Commentary.**

Figure 1 shows two examples of hyperlinked commentary. The first link, “Mouse has a problem” moves from describing the problem (mouse is so scared that she runs across the lion’s nose and wakes him up) to analysis of the author’s craft (why the author might choose to have the mouse running across the lion’s nose to illustrate

how tiny the mouse is in relation to the lion) and understanding of the mouse’s behavior (pressure can make us act in stupid ways).

In addition to this written commentary, the audio button can be clicked to hear an oral reading of the commentary, or it may provide additional commentary. Some students will find it easier to express themselves orally, and some will appreciate being able to listen and learn through the oral narration. Finally, to further illustrate the dramatic difference in size (and power) of the two animals, photographs of the lion and mouse are inserted into the slide.

The second link, “Lion is king of the jungle,” also illustrates understanding of the text and analysis of author’s craft, with an audio narration link. Note that in both examples, comprehension and analysis are represented. Also, although there are only two hyperlinked commentary slides for this section of the fable, it is easy to imagine adding additional links. For example, at the word level, *timid*, *angrily*, and *generous* might be important to expand on. The sentence in which mouse begs for his life using a very formal language register would also be fun to tackle.

#### **Illustration Remix With Speech and Thought Balloons.**

Remix—in which we view video spoofs, listen to songs and raps that sample other artists’ work, and enjoy multimedia art presentations of iconic symbols and

social practices—is abundant in popular culture. Knobel and Lankshear (2008) made a compelling case for expanding notions of composition to include remix, suggesting that this is a valued and important form of communication that should have a place in school, as well as out of school. I use the term *remix* to describe students’ enhancement of text illustrations with dialogue or inner-thought balloons. It is a simple example of remix, but lets students know that adding their unique perspective to someone else’s creative work is a legitimate form of expression (with attribution, of course!). Starting with an illustration from the text, remix focuses attention on the meaning of the text again, this time as interpreted by the illustrator.

Figure 2 shows two hyperlinked slides from the base text slide, one for saying and one for thinking. To create the thought bubbles for each character, the reader must reread the text and closely examine the illustration to infer how the character is feeling and thinking. The mouse expands beyond the text and addresses one theme of the fable when she says “I want him to know little animals can be powerful, too!” The mouse’s speech balloon in the second hyperlink is a more basic representation of the students’ understanding of the plot episode and

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*“Children talk things through, negotiating with each other about what to say and how to say it. They also help each other ‘get the job done.’”*

the mouse’s motivation for helping lion. Recording the dialogue is usually quite appealing to students as they play with different voices and expression to make their remixed illustration entertaining for their audience.

### **Hyperlinked Illustration**

**Commentary.** The quality of illustrations in today’s picture books and illustrated texts is simply amazing. The popularity of graphic novels and manga is another indicator of the appeal and importance of visual communication. Another option for students’ hypertext analysis is to include commentary that reflects their close viewing of the illustration. Figure 2 shows a hyperlinked Illustrator’s Design slide. The commentary reveals how the illustrator expresses the difference in power at this stage of the story (mouse has power and lion does not), where the action is taking place (in the foreground with mouse), and how lion’s emotions are communicated (hunched body position, sad face). The analysis reveals integration of evidence from the illustration and the text.

### **Provide Collaboration Options**

There are lots of ways to structure this activity so that students have options to create their hypertext independently, with a partner, or in a whole-class teacher-guided context. When collaborating with a partner, both children have lots of opportunities to contribute ideas and multimodal

composition work. In our work with students creating multimodal retellings, Blaine Smith and I have found that partner collaboration is manageable and helpful to students (Dalton, 2012; Dalton & Smith, 2012). Children talk things through, negotiating with each other about what to say and how to say it. They also help each other “get the job done,” managing the time and process for each other.

To help structure the process, you may want to ask the partners to create two entries so that each student can take the lead on the computer. When creating a hypertext with a small group or class, have students volunteer to create hyperlinked commentary at the word or sentence level. These hyperlinked slides can then be combined on a master hypertext PowerPoint by either the teacher or some tech-savvy students in the class. For the illustration enhancements, multiple students can create these, share them, and discuss how the different representations expressed the students’ interpretation of the text.

### **Compose for an Audience**

Students will become invested in these multimodal hypertexts as they experiment with how to express their understanding and analysis through their commentary and illustration enhancements. They will want to share them with an audience. Schedule sharing sessions during which students present their pieces, describing how they drew on text evidence and the modal affordances of the PowerPoint tool to express themselves, and getting feedback from peers (What is really powerful? What new understanding of the text, author’s craft, or illustrator’s design have they gained?). As students become more skillful and create hypertexts with multiple links, you may ask students to select one hyperlink and one illustration enhancement to ensure everyone’s participation.

In addition to this in-class real-time sharing, share students’ work online on your class blog or school website, inviting parents and others to respond. It’s also a good idea to post the PowerPoint slides on a class computer(s) so that students can read and view them during free time or as part of the literacy block.

### **Pitfalls**

#### ***Making It Too Complex a Process at the Beginning***

It is possible to create quite elaborate hypertext commentaries (you will find some students really go to town

*“Getting feedback from peers...What is really powerful? What new understanding of the text, author’s craft, or illustrator’s design have they gained?”*

with this kind of nonlinear, expressive journey of the text and illustrations). At the beginning, I recommend that you show a few examples and then ask students to try creating one commentary link (they choose the text segment) or illustration remix with thought or speech balloons. Share or present the slides, and let students' creativity and thinking inspire them for more work.

### **Not Taking Time to Teach Hypertext Linking**

Children are very familiar with hyperlinks—they click on them all the time in e-books, games, and so on. They might not understand how to create their own hyperlinks and will benefit from a step-by-step demonstration. I usually underline the text to be linked in the base text slide to help me remember the source. Then, I create the slide with the commentary, including the back arrow graphic. I go back to the base text and insert a hyperlink to the commentary slide. The last step is to hyperlink from the back arrow in the commentary slide to the source slide. It sounds more complicated than it is, but students will need some practice. It's always a good idea to teach a small group of students to be the "hyperlink helpers" so that they can assist with this process.

### **Conclusion**

It is a challenge to engage students in close reading without making it a laborious exercise. We know something

has gone awry when they groan at the thought of rereading a text multiple times to respond to a long list of teacher-provided, text-dependent questions. Yes, there is a role for these questions (an essential role, I would suggest). However, there is more than one way to develop students' interest and skill in analyzing, critiquing, and responding to text.

The multimodal hypertext with commentary and illustration remix offers students multiple pathways for thinking about, critiquing, and expressing their understanding of written and illustrated text. Reading text and viewing illustrations is integrated with composing with writing, sound, and images. Perhaps most important, it is an authentic literacy practice (related to text annotation, a time-honored tradition in literature and other disciplines) and one that has the potential to be highly engaging and productive for students.

I invite you to try out and customize this activity with your students and to post comments on *The Reading Teacher's* Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/pages/The-Reading-Teacher/297544810290021](http://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Reading-Teacher/297544810290021)). It would be great to learn from one another as we experiment with digital literacies in our classrooms. The original PowerPoint is also available in the Supporting Information section in the online version of this article. Feel free to use and remix!

### **Supporting Information**

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:

A close reading of *The Lion and the Mouse*.

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