**Close Analytical Reading through a Structured Journal**

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Structured journaling encourages students to read closely by asking them to activate and track thinking processes that are the most essential for the focused reading of a text. Because understanding a complex text invariably requires reading it carefully and slowly, structured journaling is hard work. It requires considerable effort from the student to track and unravel confusions as well as to note and synthesize insights. Doing this without the benefit of guiding questions is what makes this even harder, as students are essentially asked to pose their own questions and answers. Akin to the initial classroom struggles discussed in other essays, some students may be slow to appreciate the value of structured journaling given the difficulty of the task.

Similarly, it is hard work for the teacher to respond to students’ journaling with feedback that will push students to go further than they might without prodding. Both student and teacher might long to return to the structure and support questions can offer. However, the practice of resolving for oneself what is important or what is confusing and tracking it results in a far stronger and more independent reader, and is another step in the ultimate goal of making these practices habitual**.** Like the question and answer format of other exemplars, structured journaling is designed to help students internalize the task of close reading—deciphering what they have read and noticing insights and inferences in the text so that they will learn to read carefully whenever they need or want to.

For structured journaling to work effectively, the text under study needs to be subdivided into digestible “chunks” that can be both read and commented on by students in the time allotted for this task. Students are then given the responsibility to track specific aspects of their understanding in their journals – aspects that are selected to align with the research finding on the effective comprehension activities.

When first introducing the idea of a structured journal, it is essential to frame the elements listed below one at a time and gradually to develop student comfort level and facility. Remember that structured journaling asks students to take full responsibility for understanding complex text without the guiding questions they are accustomed to.

* Ask students to keep track of **what they don’t completely understand**. These might be references that they don’t understand or words or ideas that are unfamiliar or unusual.
* Ask students what they think are **the most important ideas and/or parts** of the text. Why do they think so? What evidence is there in the text to support their viewpoint?
* Ask students to complete the sentence **“I wonder…”** when thinking about the text. It can be anything from wondering why the author is making the decisions s/he is to something in the text that made them stop and think.
* Ask students to **make connections** to o**ther reading**s and work they have performed in the class. Where are the similarities—or differences—between this text and others?

Tracking these features of comprehension and self-monitoring is a powerful way to have students connect to the text, prepare for discussion, and sharpen their expression of any confusions they have encountered while they read. Once each element above has been introduced and practiced through modeling, group work and feedback, students can be tasked to do this for themselves.

For each element being tracked (from above) students should make a habit of noting where in the text they are responding to. Tracking this way will serve to convince students that structured journaling is a valuable use of their time when they see that everyone can quickly reference what the text actually says when the issue they have noted emerges in class discussion—or for finding passages later on when gathering evidence from the text to complete a writing assignment.

Teaching students that they are accountable for noticing and tracking what they read is a potent way of cultivating the kind of comprehension only gleaned through close reading. The strength of the structured journal is that students are being held accountable for producing a deep response to the text of their own making.

On the face of it, structured journaling appears to let teachers “off the hook” from the hard work of developing the sorts of probing text based questions found in these exemplars, but nothing could be further from the truth. Teachers must still evaluate the depth of each student’s understanding, but with less of a structure to do so since questions create a common standard by which to measure the responses of students. Using structured journals will require teachers themselves to be outstanding close readers, anticipating and noting the locations in the text where confusions are likely to occur and the range of answers students might give to resolve the tensions they encounter.

To assist students in understanding the expectations inherent in successful structured journaling, teachers should share examples of strong and weak journal entries (and insist that paltry efforts be redone). If students are consistently held accountable for being careful observers of their own understanding, they can start to internalize a high standard of what close reading entails.

In the human digestion textbook exemplar where structured journaling is demonstrated, there are still questions present. I wanted to offer teachers a dual pathway to get students fully into the text and to offer a clear comparison between structured journaling and questions and answers. The textbook exemplar also serves as a demonstration that “useful” texts are part of the universe of texts worthy of close reading as well as the short elegant pieces that other writers have worked with.

Structured journaling builds stamina in both teachers and students by demanding of both the rigorous task of creating their own scaffolding when engaging with the text. By asking for this kind of independent judgment before any questions are raised and addressed, teachers and students alike have to rely on their own thinking and reading. This brings both parties into the text and will strengthen everyone’s ability to engage with deep questions about the text. When students start to see their own observations and understanding and thoughts about a text mirrored in the questions that come up after they have engaged deeply with a text, their own reading ability is validated. At the same time teachers are training themselves in the techniques of close reading and text dependent questions by witnessing the responses of students to the text. Both activities serve to strengthen the other and both contribute to developing stronger readers and richer classrooms.