

# The Art of Close Reading (Part Three)

by Richard Paul and Linda Elder

In the previous two columns we introduced the idea of close reading, emphasizing the importance of the following:

- understanding your purpose in reading
- understanding the author's purpose in writing
- seeing ideas in a text as being interconnected
- looking for and understanding systems of meaning
- engaging a text while reading
- getting beyond impressionist reading
- formulating questions and seeking answers to those questions while reading

To read well, in addition to having the above understandings, students must be able to identify the big picture within a text, to determine the key ideas within the text early on, and to see the scaffolding that connects all the ideas within the text. In other words, they need to develop structural reading abilities. Moreover, students need to see that there are generalizable skills one must develop to read sentences and paragraphs well. In addition, students must develop reading skills specific to reading certain kinds of texts – like textbooks, newspaper articles and editorials.

In this column we will focus on the theory of close reading. We will discuss “structural reading” first. We will then make some basic points about the art of reading sentence and paragraphs. We will conclude with some domain specific theory: how to read a textbook, how to read a newspaper, and how to read an editorial. For examples of the theory we outline here, see *The Thinker's Guide to How to Read a Paragraph: The Art of Close Reading*. The following guideline is written directly to the student:

## Structural Reading

Structural reading is a form of close reading applied to the overall structure of an extended text (usually a book). In it, we focus on what we can learn about the book from its title, preface, introduction, and table of contents. Structural reading has two main uses. First, it enables us to evaluate a book to determine whether we want to spend the time to read it carefully. Second, it provides an overview to use as scaffolding in reading

the text. If we can get a basic idea of what a book is driving at before we read it in detail, we are much better able to make sense of the parts of it as we read them paragraph by paragraph. Knowledge of a whole helps us understand all of its parts. Knowledge of a part helps us better understand the whole (which contains the parts).

### **To read structurally, ask these questions:**

- What does the title tell me about this book?
- What is the main idea in the book? (You should be able to figure this out from skimming the introduction, preface, and first chapter.)
- What are the parts of the whole, and how does the book deal with those parts? (Again, this may be found in an overview in the introduction, preface, first chapter, and/or table of contents.)
- In the light of my structural reading, what questions would I pursue during close reading?

### **How to Read a Sentence**

Reading a sentence consists, first of all, in finding a way to state what the sentence says so we can think the thought the sentence expresses. Further ways to make the meaning of a sentence clear are: elaborating the sentence, finding an example, and illustrating its meaning.

Finding key sentences means finding the sentences that are the driving force within a book. Structural reading is one way by which we locate key paragraphs and boil them down to key sentences, and thence to key ideas and key questions.

An important part of reading with discipline is to connect sentences to the broader context within which they are located, to see how they fit within the written piece. For every sentence you read, you might ask:

- How does this sentence connect with the other sentences in the text?
- How does this sentence relate to the organizing idea of this text as a whole?

Good readers read sentences in relationship to other sentences, connecting each sentence with the purpose of the written piece. Taking a sentence out of context can pose problems because sentences read in isolation from the sentences that precede or follow them often overstate a point. The sentences that precede or follow usually clarify the author's true meaning, or bring it in line with supporting facts. Good readers read a text charitably and generously. They look for qualifications of points that otherwise might seem false or overstated.

## How to Read a Paragraph

Carefully reading a paragraph involves finding the idea or question that is the driving force within the paragraph. Finding key paragraphs consists of finding the ideas or questions that are the driving force within the book. Structural reading, you will remember, is an important means by which we locate key paragraphs.

All paragraphs within a written piece should connect to every other paragraph so that we can see logical connections between ideas. All ideas should form a system of meanings. As you move from paragraph to paragraph, ask:

- What is the most important idea in this paragraph?
- How do the ideas in this paragraph relate to the ideas in previous paragraphs?
- How are the important ideas in the text connected?

Look for paragraphs that focus on significant ideas or questions. Connect those ideas, when possible, to situations and experiences that are meaningful in your life. To actively connect ideas to life situations, ask:

- How can I relate this idea to something I already understand?
- Is there an important idea here that I can use in my thinking?
- Have I ever experienced a situation that sheds light on this idea?

## How to Read a Textbook

The first and most important insight necessary for successfully reading a textbook is that all textbooks focus on “systems” which, when internalized, can help us reason through a specific set of problems. They focus on a special way of thinking about a special set of things. To elaborate, history textbooks teach a special way of thinking about events in the past. Biology textbooks teach a special way of thinking about living things. Mathematics textbooks teach a special way of thinking about the numbers, shapes, and figures. Physics textbooks teach a special way of thinking about mass and energy and their interrelations. The same is true for all other textbooks.

Thus, there is no way to learn mathematics from a math textbook without learning how to figure out correct answers to mathematical questions and problems. There is no way to learn history from a history textbook without learning how to figure out correct or reasonable answers to historical questions and problems. There is no way to learn biology from a biology textbook without learning how to figure out answers to biological questions and problems. Any subject can therefore be understood as a system of figuring out correct or reasonable answers to a certain set of questions. We study chemistry to understand chemicals and how they interact (to answer questions about

chemicals). We study psychology to figure out human behavior (to answer questions about certain human problems). All subjects can be understood in this way. All textbooks can be read in this way.

Most textbooks begin with an introductory chapter or preface that introduces us to the field of study: What is biology? What is physics? What is history? It is important for us to do a close reading of this opening chapter in order to acquire from the very beginning an insight into the most basic and fundamental concepts in the field.

Once we have a basic idea of the whole of a subject from the introductory chapter, we should be able to do some thinking within the system. Thus, with a basic idea of biology, we should be able to do some simple biological thinking. We should be able to ask some basic biological questions and identify some relevant biological information. This is crucial to success in reading the remainder of the textbook because if we do not have a clear concept of the whole, we will not be able to relate the parts (covered by the other chapters) to that whole.

Our reading strategy should not be whole, part, part, part, part, part...but, rather, whole, part, whole, part, whole, part. We first ground ourselves in a basic (though introductory) idea of the whole. We then relate each part (each subsequent chapter) to that whole. We understand the whole through integrating the parts into it. We use the whole as our tool of synthesis. We use our knowledge of the parts as a tool of analysis.

### **How to Read a Newspaper for National and International News**

To become adept at reading the news, you first must understand that every society and culture has a unique worldview. This colors what they see and how they see it. News media in the cultures of the world reflect the worldview of the culture they write for. Suppose you have two persons reporting on the events of your life — your best friend and your worst enemy. Your best friend would highlight the positive things about you; your worst enemy would highlight the negative things about you. Both would think they were simply telling the truth.

If you understand this, you can apply that understanding to how the news is constructed by every country in the world. Within any country, the news media highlight what is positive about the country; its enemies' news media highlight what is negative about it. As a critical reader of the news, you must make adjustments for both of these biases. So, if you are a Frenchman in France reading French newspapers, you must read the fine print to find out the negative things about France that are being suppressed or buried. If you are reading a newspaper from a country that considers France its enemy, you must, in a parallel way, read to correct for its one-sidedness (its predictable negativity about France).

At present, the overwhelming majority of people in the world, untrained in critical reading, are at the mercy of the news media in their own country. To learn how to read

the news critically, you can begin with our guide entitled *How to Detect Media Bias & Propaganda*. It focuses on how to:

- interpret events from the perspective of multiple views
- find multiple sources of thought and information, not simply those of the mass media
- identify the viewpoints embedded in news stories
- mentally re-write (reconstruct) news stories through awareness of how stories are told from multiple perspectives
- assess news stories for their clarity, accuracy, relevance, depth, breadth, and significance
- identify contradictions and inconsistencies in the news (often in the same story)
- identify the agenda and interests served by a story
- identify the facts covered and the facts ignored in a news story
- identify the points of view systematically presented in a favorable light and those presented in an unfavorable light

These are some of the skills that critical readers of the news develop. To take command of the way the mass media influence your thinking about the world, you must learn how to see through their biases and appreciate dissenting as well as mainstream points of view. Only then can you come to well-reasoned conclusions using a balanced approach. At present, few people have developed the skills to do this.

### **How to Read an Editorial**

To become adept at reading editorials, you must first understand that the goal of the editorial writer is to make a brief case for one side of a controversial issue. His or her goal is not to consider all sides or to do what a writer of a research paper or report is expected to do. Most people read editorials in the following way. If writers are defending what they believe, they praise the editorial. If writers are criticizing what they believe, they criticize the editorial. Therefore, they are unable to gain insights from people with whom they disagree. The fact is that most people are rigid in their thinking and largely closed-minded. There are many points of view into which they cannot enter. There are many ways to look at the world that they never examine or appreciate.

By contrast, critical readers recognize that they have been wrong in the past and may be wrong now. They recognize what they would like to believe while at the same time realizing that they may be prejudiced by that very desire. It is in this spirit of open-mindedness that we should learn to read editorials — especially the ones to which we

are least sympathetic. We must learn how to step outside of our own point of view and enter points of view with which we are unfamiliar.

Of course, we should not assume that the editorials in our own culture's newspapers provide us with a full range of points of view. What we can expect is merely that these newspapers provide us with the range of views held by the mainstream readers within the society. The goal of a newspaper is not to educate readers concerning international and dissenting points of view but rather to make money. And a newspaper makes money only when it caters to the beliefs and preconceptions of its readers. Thus, newspapers rarely present radically dissenting perspectives, and when they do, they emphasize that these are merely opinions.

Critical readers read all editorials with equal sympathy. They read to discover and digest a wide range of points of view, especially points of view that tend to be ignored in the mainstream of the culture. To enhance their breadth of vision while avoiding ethnocentrism and sociocentrism, critical readers search out dissenting media sources. For examples of dissenting news sources, see *The Miniature Guide to Media Bias and Propaganda*.

This article was adapted from *How to Read a Paragraph: The Art of Close Reading* by Richard Paul and Linda Elder.