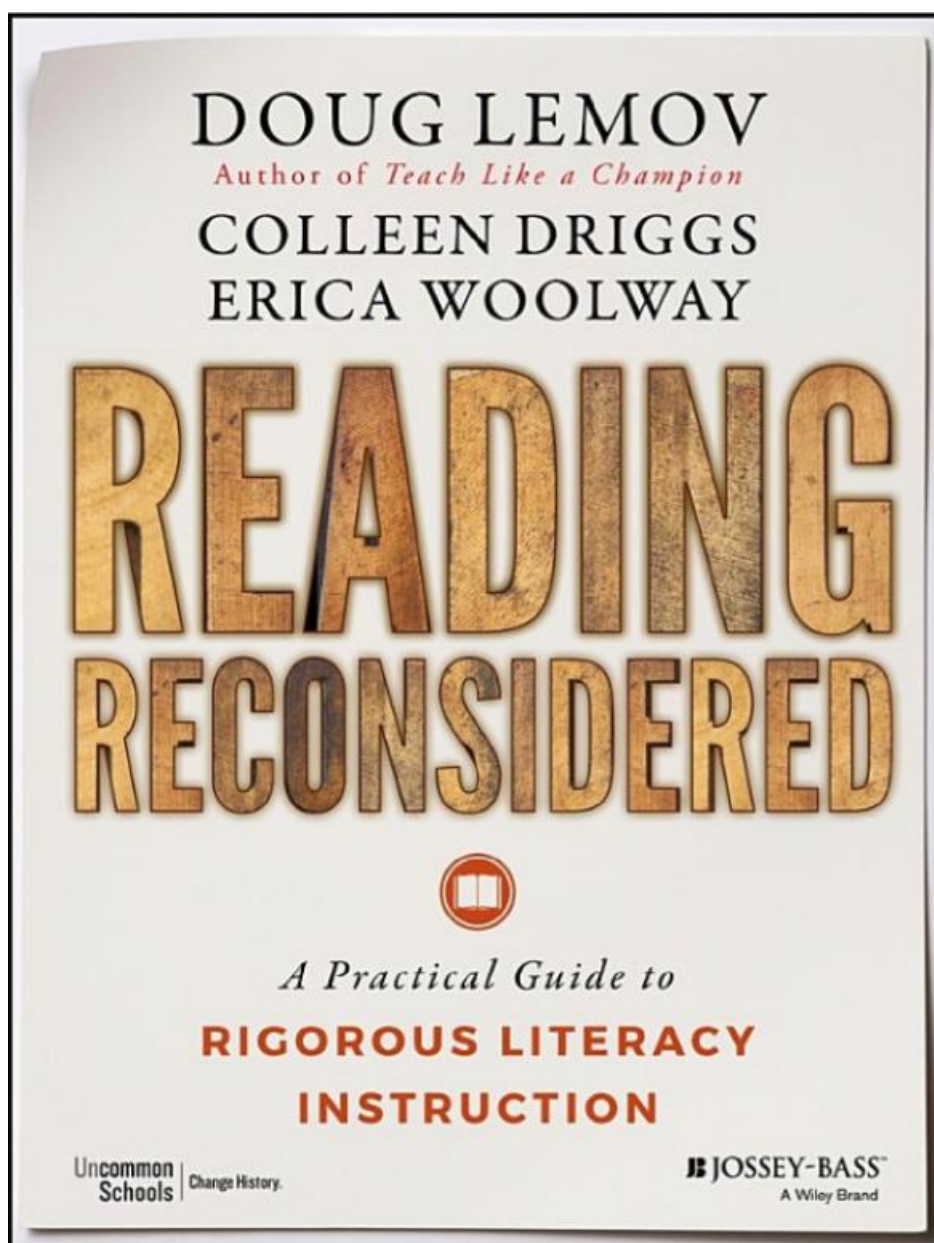


These essays were published in...



On Writing, Revision, and Close Reading

By Stephen Chiger, Director of 5–12 Literacy, North Star Academies

Beginning your Close Reading lesson with writing is a powerful way to begin with reflection—by all students. It also allows you to see what students are able to do from the get-go. Best of all, if you start your class with writing, you can end it with revision, creating a feedback loop that helps students improve, not just day to day, but moment to moment.

Hadley Roach, a seventh-grade teacher who planned a lesson on the first page of Mario Vargas Llosa's *Feast of the Goat*, recently began her class by establishing meaning—ensuring her students' literal understanding

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of the text—and moving into analysis. She wanted students to see the patterns in Vargas Llosa's diction: the violent words that established the narrator's disdain for a return to the Dominican Republic, and a more subtle pattern that revealed the disdain to be closer, perhaps, to ambivalence.

Hadley began by having students write, asking them to explain what patterns they could find in the diction and what those patterns suggested about the author. She then began moving about the room to collect data on her students' writing. Observing carefully, she was able to make a decision about her next instructional step.

Think about that for a moment. How often do we bemoan the lack of attention and care students give to our writing feedback—feedback that we spend hours generating? It's hard to blame students too much. For them, a paper they wrote a week ago may feel as though it was written last year. It's an artifact.

But if we respond to student writing in the moment, we create something rare and powerful: a shortened instructional feedback loop that makes feedback relevant and urgent.

As it turns out, Hadley's students found the pattern of diction she was hoping they'd see (sounds "assault" ears and "assail" each other; the city is an "explosion of savage life"), but they weren't quite sure about what it meant. They knew there was something happening, but they couldn't explain how word choice affected meaning.

Great teaching begins at the moment learning breaks down, and Hadley began her text-dependent questioning there, zooming in with students on specific words and helping them assess the connotations individually with TDQs. Gradually, they appeared to see how the text worked.

When she finished her questioning, Hadley had students revise their work, asking for a very specific change: "In your revision, I want you to include a breakdown of the word *savage* as part of your writing." That's the moment of change. Hadley targeted an error, remediated it through questioning, and sent students to fix it. Not for homework. Not on a paper she'd get to on the next weekend. She did it right then.

Hadley monitored again to see if students could demonstrate mastery. Students' writing is the key to seeing this growth. Great literature discussions too often give teachers a false positive. Teachers hear a few students sharing insights and assume everyone is at their level. Hadley needed to be sure that everyone could make the change.

On this particular day, it turns out that one of Hadley's classes fully grasped the text, but the other didn't. So she showed them a piece of strong student writing, asked the class to analyze what made it effective, and then had students revise yet again. Her feedback loop was fast, targeted, and conducted in response to real-time data.

Her teaching—and use of writing—should remind teachers that students don't need innate talent to become masterful at their craft. They simply need patience, practice, loads of revision, and coaching toward mastery, one small detail at a time.

It's Not Just the Questions, It's the Sequence

by Stephen Chiger, Director of 5–12 Literacy, North Star Academies

Close reading instruction may hinge on great questions, but great questions alone won't make a class powerful. Decisions about sequencing often boil down to deciding when to toggle or zoom; they create a road map for how to think about text.

Here's a series of questions from a lesson by Megan Fernando and Julia Goldenheim on John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*, in which Steinbeck introduces a smug, self-centered doctor who casually exploits the protagonist's village. Steinbeck writes:

His eyes rested in puffy little hammocks of flesh and his mouth drooped with discontent.

Megan and Julia prepared a series of questions designed to help students analyze the imagery in "puffy little hammocks of flesh" and a mouth that "drooped with discontent." Their first question established meaning:

Let's look more closely at the image of "puffy little hammocks of flesh."
What does this mean the doctor looked like? Can you describe him?

Next, they toggled over to the analysis side of the chart and zoomed in tight on the text:

What ideas do we typically associate with hammocks?

Steinbeck could have chosen something else; he could have said "puffy little *cradles* of flesh." Instead, he said "hammocks." Why? What does this specific choice of words add to the text?

Then:

Can anyone suggest another piece of loaded diction for us to unpack?

After that, they zoomed out slightly, asking students to begin to construct an interpretation based on other language choices:

What about "drooped"? Does this word support or challenge our hypothesis about the doctor's characterization?

Finally they zoomed out even more broadly:

Now let's look at Steinbeck's diction across the whole passage introducing the doctor. How does his imagery characterize the doctor? What is Steinbeck telling us?

It's worth noticing that Megan and Julia zoom in and out of the text to push students to consider specific language choices, *and then connect them to Steinbeck's larger purpose or the effect he creates.*

The process of zooming in and out is often implicit in what teachers want students to do when asking students to analyze texts. Their ability to make meaning comes from the continual process of reflecting deeply on an author's choices, scrutinizing them, and considering the implications of those decisions. Zoom in to language and zoom out to author's purpose: it's the friction that makes the fire.