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# Guiding Principles READI Literature Intervention

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## Project READI Technical Report #9

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# PROJECT **READi**



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Project READI operated as a multi-institution collaboration among the Learning Sciences Research Institute, University of Illinois at Chicago; Northern Illinois University; Northwestern University; WestEd's Strategic Literacy Initiative; and Inquirium, LLC. Project READI developed and researched interventions in collaboration with classroom teachers that were designed to improve reading comprehension through argumentation from multiple sources in literature, history, and the sciences appropriate for adolescent learners. Curriculum materials such as those in this module were developed based on enacted instruction and are intended as case examples of the READI approach to deep and meaningful disciplinary literacy and learning.

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**Guiding Principles**  
**READI Literature Interventions**  
**Carol D. Lee**

One can think of the process of literary interpretation as akin to putting together a jigsaw puzzle, requiring the reader to draw on his or her prior knowledge to piece together details from the literary text to infer patterns to which the reader attributes significance or meaning. The reader draws on multiple sources of prior knowledge in this meaning-making process: literary genres, character types, themes often archetypal, rhetorical moves on which literary authors often draw; the reader's knowledge about what makes people tick and about particular scenarios of human experience. In addition, what readers do with texts is influenced by what enterprise in which they think they are engaged (e.g. recalling the plot, imagining what a teacher wants to hear, figuring out how form and content are mutually constitutive, imagining lessons for life, etc.). In teaching literary interpretation to novice and especially struggling readers, we need to examine the sources of knowledge that the author likely assumes the reader brings (Rabinowitz, 1987) and to determine what the students we are teaching already know and what they need to know in order to engage meaningfully with the text in question (Lee, 1995, 2007). We aim to teach both knowledge and dispositions, to socialize inquiry, persistence and grit to engage in the demands of complex literary reasoning; and to construct interpretations that are both personally meaningful to our students as human beings and that can be justified through reasoning that draws on connections warranted from the text, extrapolations to the everyday world and to other texts. The warrants (e.g. the principles on which we draw to explain why others should accept our evidence) can come from the kinds of commitments that students as members (burgeoning or otherwise) of communities of readers value: personal relevance exemplified in reader response communities; relevance to particular communities such as women in feminist readings, to issues of class and power as one finds in Marxist or Black Aesthetic readings; to the salience of the text in itself as one finds in New Criticism, or other communities of readers who place value on presumed intentions of the author or on the historical context of either the setting or when the work was written. Others have argued the value over the course of a students' high school career of being introduced to these multiple ways that communities of readers approach the interpretation of literary texts (Appleman, 2000; Wolf, 1995).

Drawing on prior research by Hillocks (Hillocks & Ludlow, 1984; Smith & Hillocks, 1988) and the Cultural Modeling Framework by Lee (2007; 1995), the READI Literature Interventions include the following core practices:

## Gateway Activities

Gateway activities are intended to help students generate criteria by which to make judgments about characters and themes. The goal is to help students begin to consider the complexities, contradictions, and differentiations that a rich consideration of a character or a theme invite, to steer students away from making simplistic and snap judgments. For example, students can wrestle with the problem of understanding how it is that human beings come to carry out acts that on the surface are bad, even evil (e.g. Raskolnikov in Crime and Punishment, Cholly in The Bluest Eye, Sethe in Beloved, Emily in A Rose for Emily); or whether Atticus is a good parent in To Kill A Mockingbird; or whether Odysseus is a hero and if so what kind). Gateway activities can also involve generating definitions of themes (e.g. what is courageous action; what is justice; what is love). Our primary references for designing gateway activities come from the following research exemplars: (Johannesen, Kahn, & Walter, 1982; Smagorinsky, McCann, & Kern, 1987).

## Cultural Data Sets

Cultural data sets are everyday texts (e.g. music lyrics, clips from movies, t.v. shows, advertisements, etc.) with which students are already very familiar and that pose interpretive problems similar to the ones students will meet in the canonical texts we will be teaching. The focus of examining cultural data sets is to support students themselves in generating strategies for noticing and interpreting problems of symbolism, irony, satire, and unreliable narration. The assumption is that students are already using these strategies tacitly as they make sense of the satire in a comedy film or t.v. show or the symbolism in music lyrics they value. The process of supporting students in examining cultural data sets moves beyond having students articulate what they understand from these everyday texts (e.g. what meanings they derive from watching or listening to them). While students are expected to talk and write about what meanings they make of these everyday texts, the ultimate goal is to help them to articulate what drew their attention to particular features of the texts and what strategies they used to construct their interpretations. Lee (1995, 2007) refers to these as metacognitive instructional conversations, discussions in small and whole groups where students make public strategies they use to notice and strategies they use to infer meanings about what they notice.

Students will typically describe the strategies they use in local terms, referring to the particular details of interest in the target cultural data set. The teacher's goal is to re-voice (O'Connor & Michaels, 1993) the local explanations of students into academic language (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007) of rules or heuristics. For example, students may say 'People at Burger King don't wear masks' in response to a question about one of the stanzas in the Fugees' The Mask or 'roses don't grow from concrete' in Tupac's The Rose That Grew From Concrete. What they mean

by these local explanations is that they paid attention to these details because they were in a prominent position (e.g. in the title and repeated across stanzas) and that a literal interpretation either doesn't make sense or is not sufficient to understand what the author is trying to say. Rabinowitz (1987) refers to these heuristics as "rules of notice" and "rules of signification". See chapters 2 and 3 from Lee's (2007) Culture, Language and Literacy for detailed explanations and illustrations of supporting students in examining cultural data sets in order to derive strategies for noticing and interpreting. In these chapters, Lee articulates strategies for reasoning about symbolism and satire. Michael Smith (1989, 1991) articulates and demonstrates strategies for reasoning about unreliable narration and irony (Booth, 1974, 1983).

There are two important caveats with regard to this core practice for teaching literary interpretive processes. We need to make a distinction between strategies for noticing details and patterns in a literary text that are likely to be important for interpreting the texts, particularly beyond simple literal understandings of plot, and strategies for constructing interpretations of what we think those details may signify. The examination of cultural data sets is intended to help students articulate both strategies for noticing as well as strategies for making sense or attributing meaning to what we notice. The targets for noticing have to do with details that go beyond the literal and that signify that the author may be intending to convey meanings that are symbolic, ironic, satiric, or imply unreliable narration. Here we draw on distinctions made by Rabinowitz (1987) between what he calls "rules of notice" and "rules of signification." It is necessary to remember that having strategies for noticing salient details does not tell the reader how to make sense of what the reader notices.

Students then move from cultural data sets to apply those strategies for noticing and for attributing significance or meaning to the canonical texts that make up the unit of study. In Project READI, we have developed worksheets for students to use to

- follow characters
- follow plot
- identify unusual details they notice and explain why they noticed
- structure processes for interpreting that which they hypothesize may be symbolic or satiric, or ironic, or evidence of unreliable narration.

We have also developed guidelines for annotation of texts. Annotation examines generic metacognitive moves by students (e.g. asking questions, making predictions, making connections) using rubrics developed by the Reading Apprenticeship Project at West Ed (Schoenbach, Greenleaf, & Murphy, 2012), Project READI partners, available in Reading for Understanding. In addition, annotations should include students' identifying and commenting on features of the text (cultural data set and canonical texts) that signal attention to characterization,

theme, rhetorical patterns (e.g. repetitions, patterns, disjunctures, understatements, etc.) and rhetorical problems (e.g. symbolism, satire, unreliable narration, etc.) as well as their hypotheses about what these features may signify or mean to them.

### Building Prior Knowledge

While gateway activities and cultural data sets are intended to build particular kinds of strategic knowledge, texts may also require that students build background knowledge about the historical context of the setting or period in which the literary work was produced. Using expository texts and videos are useful in helping students to have relevant historical background knowledge (e.g. knowledge about Puritan ideals in reading The Scarlet Letter; knowledge about Jim Crow in reading Invisible Man or Native Son, etc.)

### Argumentation

READI interventions focus on both the analysis of single texts and comparative analyses across several texts. The targets of argumentation address what Hillocks (Hillocks & Ludlow, 1984) calls author generalizations (e.g. interpretations of theme or what the reader thinks the text is saying about the world beyond the text) and structural generalizations (e.g. examinations of how authors use structure and language in order to convey meanings; both what the text conveys as well as how the text conveys). The focus on how the text conveys typically addresses how authors go about creating structures and ways of using language that convey meanings that are symbolic, ironic, satiric, or evidence of unreliable narration; or how choices made by the author in language and structure convey some dimension of theme (e.g. what actions, structures, language convey the idea that this is a particular kind of coming of age story).

Argumentation is both oral and written, conveyed both individually as well as through dialogic discussion with others. In this practice, we draw from extensive research on how to structure dialogic discussions in classrooms (Haroutunian-Gordon, 2009; Michaels, O'Connor, & Resnick, 2008; Nystrand, 1997; Strong & Strong, 1996) as well as orchestrating classroom discussions that draw on students' everyday language practices (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejada, 1999; Lee, 2005). The analytic practices and the oral discussions are intended as preparation for writing arguments.

The focus on helping students learn to write extended arguments draws from several bodies of work: Toulmin's articulation of the structure of arguments as entailing claims, evidence, backing, warrants, counter claims, conditional arguments, and nested arguments; Hillocks' (1995, 1999) research on teaching students how to derive claims, evaluate evidence, offer warrants and backing. The core practices around teaching argumentation involve supporting students in

examining data sets and scenarios from which they examine what is often competing evidence in order to articulate a claim and then argue for the evidence that supports the claim and the reasons (e.g. warrants and backing) that someone else should believe that the evidence supports the claim. Examples of such scenarios can be found in Hillocks (1995, 1999), Smagorinsky and colleagues (Smagorinsky, Johannesen, Kahn, & McCann, 2011) as well as Treat and Hornstein (1991). These are often, but not necessarily, data from crime scenes where students are expected to act as detectives. One important point made by Hillocks is that students are more likely to write well reasoned arguments if they have from the beginning access to data that can serve as sources of evidence. Besides the published scenarios, teachers can also construct their own data sets and scenarios on topics that may be relevant to policies in school or challenges students face. Hillocks argues for three kinds of arguments: forensic arguments which entail getting the facts; arguments of judgment in which students use criteria for evaluating available evidence in order to reach a judgment (e.g. a claim) and arguments of policy. Our focus is on forensic arguments and arguments of judgment. Forensic arguments for this project include gathering data from the story (e.g. what all do we know about Pauline as a mother in The Bluest Eye) and arguments of judgment (e.g. on the basis of what criteria do we evaluate how Pauline came to be the kind of mother she was/ and what kind of mother was she).

Students begin their initial writing of arguments based on the data in these scenarios and data sets. Teachers use and students self-reflect using rubrics developed by the project for evaluating arguments. The rubrics focus on both the structure and reasoning within the argument as well as use of appropriate grammar, punctuation, word choice, sentence structure, and logical organization. Students then go on to use the skills they have developed in constructing arguments orally and in written essays to the analysis of cultural data sets and of stories reflecting themes generated from gateway activities and then the canonical texts in the units of instruction.

Considering that our targets for growth, represented in the pre-post assessments we use, focus on evaluating students' abilities to interpret literary texts in terms of author generalizations (e.g. theme) and structural generalization (e.g. analysis of how the author goes about structuring the text and using language to convey meanings beyond the literal), it is imperative that across any given unit of instruction students have multiple opportunities to construct orally and in writing such arguments. It is also important to note that the pre-post assessments involve not only engaging in such complex analyses of a single text, but to compare and contrast across several texts (e.g. comparing how two different texts address a particular theme and how authors go about using particular rhetorical strategies for conveying theme and characterization). These complex interpretive tasks involve not only the ability to reason about texts individually, but equally important to know how to examine points of similarity and difference across texts, how to use

evidence to support claims about such points of similarity and difference across texts, and to structure their writing in a logical way in order to convey comparison and/or contrast. This rhetorical problem of constructing a comparison/contrast argument may involve the choice to make the argument for one text, then for the second text, and finally to summarize points of similarity and difference; or it can involve in each paragraph arguing for a particular point of similarity and difference. This is not easy to accomplish and therefore students need both multiple opportunities to write such essays, and also explicit attention on matters of organization. They also need multiple opportunities to revise their written essays in order to gain competence in editing and proofing their writing in order to become most persuasive to an external audience.

Besides use of claims and evidence, attention to organization, and certainly attention to issues of grammar and spelling, there is an equally important challenge of helping students learn to use academic language to convey their ideas. Because Project READI focuses on argumentation in academic disciplines, students must learn to use what we may think of as the language of literature. With this goal in mind, Sarah Levine of Stanford University, has developed sentence stems that students can use in crafting claims and contextualizing evidence.

Overall, the graphic organizers for structuring arguments, the heuristic organizers for identifying and gathering data on interpretive problems, and organizers for following character and plot along with the sentence stems provide students with tools for making their thinking public and as resources for developing oral and written arguments.

### Concluding Thoughts

We need to address relationships between a focus on generic reading strategies (Greenleaf, 2001) and discipline specific strategies (Goldman & Snow, in press; Lee & Spratley, 2009) In the READI literature intervention, we are certainly teaching general reading strategies (e.g. monitoring whether you understand what you are reading, asking questions, making predictions, summarizing, in expository texts noticing structures that suggest what ideas and what kinds of relationships among ideas are likely to be addressed – e.g. paying attention to titles, sub-titles, graphic displays as evidence of cause-effect, sequence, part-whole relations, etc.) and broad instructional practices like talk to the text, think-pair-share. These are important foundations that apply across texts. At the same time, we are focusing on discipline specific strategies (e.g. talk to the text about particular kinds of features of the text or particular kinds of problems; moving beyond summarizing plot; learning to ask particular kinds of questions; looking for details that signal a coming of age story, or a story of magical realism, or a hero's quest as particular kinds of text structures in literature, etc.). So it is important to not think about our teaching of reading strategies as either generic strategies or discipline specific



strategies, but focusing on both; and thinking about particular discipline specific strategies as disciplinary instantiations of generic strategies.

We must resist the assumption that if we build it, they will come. We must constantly examine sources of resistance that our students display (Lee, Spencer, & Harpalani, 2003). We must draw from our understanding of child and adolescent development in order to figure out what informs students' resistance to engaging with the complex problem solving into which we are inviting them. Such sources of resistance may be perceptions that the work is too hard, that the problems being addressed are not personally meaningful to them, that they have competing interests and pressures in their lives that take away from time to do homework, for example, or to be engaged during class. There are no simple ways to think about student resistance or to address these problems. However, we encourage teachers to engage with a teacher professional community and to read widely about child and adolescent development (American Psychological Association, 2002; American Psychological Association Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents, 2008; Noguera, 2003; Toldson, 2008), to talk with students directly and their families in order to figure out what may be contributing to resistance we see. Teachers are encouraged to be creative in thinking in dynamic ways about how to respond to such resistance, including making what they see as necessary adaptations of the core practices, but continuously examining the impact of their adaptations (e.g. that students do become engaged, become active learners, and display evidence of growth in their ability to carry out the kinds of interpretations and argumentation that the project seeks to cultivate).

Finally, the competencies undergirding each of these core practices take time to develop. Students will not learn to internalize strategies with one or two cultural data sets; or to delve fully into criteria for making judgments with one gateway activity; or to write the kinds of sophisticated arguments we value with one or two opportunities to write and little opportunity to revise.

Finally, we argue that the goal of helping students, especially struggling readers, learn to engage deeply and critically with works of literature that have lasted the tests of time from across human cultural communities is a good unto itself; and to be open to exploring contemporary literatures from across human cultural communities that are in dialogue with these on-going conversations about what it means to be human is equally compelling. Literature opens up unique opportunities to interrogate what it means to be human, to wrestle with conundrums for which there are no simple, straightforward answers. But to engage in such inquiry and self reflection, students need to develop the technical toolkits, the dispositions and epistemologies to tackle such complexity and to persist. We believe the framework described here offers generative tools for such work.

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## Appendix A. Sources of Text Complexity – Literature and Generic

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| <b>Reviewer:</b>  |
| <b>Generic</b>  |
| Length  |
| Syntax  |
| Coherence markers   |
| Vocabulary  |
| <b>Literary</b>   |
| Theme   |
| Historical Context  |
| Prior knowledge assumed by author   |
| Plot Structure  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Linear/Converted</li> <li>• Causal links explicit/implicit</li> <li>• Number of action events</li> <li>• Character type(s)</li> <li>• Number of main characters</li> <li>• Function of minor characters</li> <li>• Complexity of relationships</li> <li>• Amount of dialogue and/or character description</li> </ul> |
| Psychological complexity  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uni-dimensional</li> <li>• Multi-dimensional</li> </ul>  |
| Stable or changing character(s)   |
| <b>Rhetoric &amp; Structure</b>   |
| Key Interpretive Problem(s)   |
| Rules of Notice for the Interpretive Problem  |

### Generic Sources of Text Complexity

| Sources of complexity            | Dimensions to consider  |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Overall readability              |   |
| Length                           |   |
| Sentence Structure/Syntax        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Load of simple, compound, complex, compound-complex</li> </ul>   |
| Vocabulary                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tier 1, 2, 3</li> <li>• Roots</li> <li>• Affixes</li> <li>• Specialized or disciplinary</li> <li>• Figurative</li> </ul>   |
| Markers of cohesion              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role of pronouns</li> <li>• Connectors</li> <li>• Vocabulary replicating major ideas or characters</li> <li>• Role of synonyms</li> </ul>  |
| Text structure                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Single</li> <li>• Multiple</li> <li>• Markers explicit</li> <li>• Markers to be inferred</li> <li>• Identify text structure (s)</li> <li>• Graphic displays</li> <li>• Literature: Rules of notice</li> </ul>                            |
| Density of propositions/ideas    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• # Main ideas</li> <li>• # Sub claims</li> <li>• # Details to support main ideas</li> <li>• # Details to support sub claims</li> <li>• Repetitions vs single mentions or references that are important to the overall argument</li> </ul> |
| Conceptual load                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what extent are concepts made explicit vs needing to be inferred</li> </ul>   |
| Prior knowledge assumed/required | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students have the required prior knowledge</li> <li>• Prior knowledge must be built before reading</li> </ul>  |