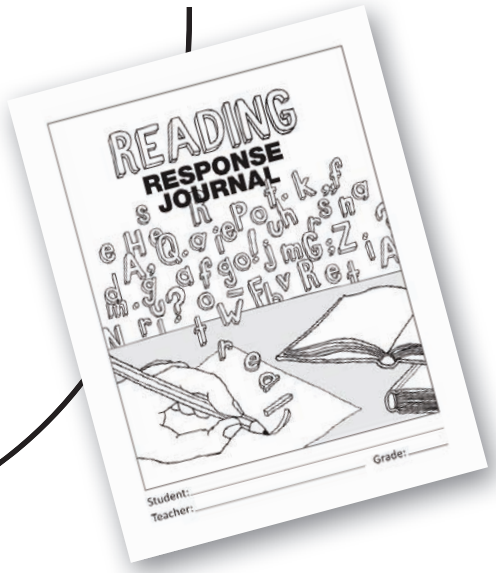
WRITTEN RESPONSE TO READING

ENHANCING READING INSTRUCTION



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INTRODUCTION

Writing has become a popular component of many state tests, and as a result has become an important instructional focus in today's schools. Writing tasks on current state tests usually take two forms—composing text and responding to text. Some states require both forms of writing but almost all states incorporate at least one of these two forms. This article focuses on developing understandings of the least understood aspect of writing (and reading)—the written response to reading. Whether it's composing text or responding to text, writing plays a critical role in the development of both readers and writers. Teachers need to understand the difference between these two aspects of writing and develop classroom practices that support both types of writing.

DIFFERENT KINDS OF WRITING

Composing Text: A "Building Up" Process

On many state tests, students are asked to *compose text*. They are asked to respond to a prompt and develop a short composition. These writing prompts often give students a topic and ask them to develop the theme if they are to write a narrative piece or, if writing an expository piece, the topic will need development. The following is an example of a writing prompt from a state test released item:

> *Many students have personal goals, such as making the honor roll, playing musical instruments, or being a top scorer in a video game. To be successful in reaching a goal, it helps to have certain qualities. Some of these might include self-discipline, determination, or a positive attitude.*
>
> *Think about a goal that you would like to achieve. In a well-developed composition, state your goal. Describe at least two qualities you will need to achieve your goal, and explain why each is important to be successful.* (MCAS Released Composition Writing Prompt, 2006)

By using narrative or expository elements to "build up" their piece, students can begin to think about how they want to convey their message. (Mooney, 2001) Many states offer students a space to *plan or organize* their ideas, after which they begin to *write or draft* using the elements in the most impactful way. Throughout the writing, students need to *revise* their piece to ensure that it is complete and makes sense. *Proofreading* for spelling errors and surface features such as capitalization and punctuation are also important factors in writing a quality piece.

During the process of writing students are using narrative and expository elements to build a piece that is well-constructed and well-developed. (Mooney, Dancing with the Pen: The Learner as a Writer, 1992) This "building up" is not only evident in the question or prompt that is posed (i.e. "…*state your goal. Describe at least two qualities you will need to achieve your goal, and explain why each is important to be successful.*"), but also in the scoring criteria used by many states. This scoring criterion usually involves areas such as topic, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. (Education Northwest, 2011)

Each of these scoring areas has close connections to narrative and expository elements and is essential for building a well-developed, well-constructed piece.

Responding to Text: A "Breaking Down" Process

Although students are asked to write, the focus of *responding to text* is on the students' understanding of the story, not on their ability to write. As part of responding to text (also known as short answer, reading response, written response, constructed response and/or extended response), students are asked to response to a reading passage. These reading passages can take the form of an article, an essay, a short story, or an excerpt from a story, a science text or a social studies text. Students are usually required to write answers to questions or prompts which directly relate to the reading and use some portion of the passage to support their answer.

Written response questions are designed to "break down" what was read in an attempt to assess students' understanding of the story. Because there are different levels of understanding, there are three different levels of written response questions—literal, inferential, analytical. (Mooney, 2004) Answering written response questions require that students have an understanding of the elements of both narrative and expository text and how the author used these elements in the development of the story. No matter what the level of question being asked, the focus of each question is on some aspect of narrative and expository elements. The following are examples of written response questions from a state website. Note the different levels of questioning, as well as the focus on narrative elements.

> *How did the character change in the story? How did you know? Answer using specific information from the text, not just background knowledge.* (inferential/analytical)

> *Describe the climate where the event took place. Include two facts from the article to support your description.* (literal/inferential)

> *What three important things happened in this story? Tell them in the order that they happened.* (literal) (adapted from CSAP, 2006)

Although written response is often considered a testing component, teachers can use written response to gain insight into their students' depth of understanding. This is especially important in determining a student's ability to comprehend. In other words, written response questions or prompts are valuable instructional tools as well as assessment (and test preparation) tools which can help teachers evaluate the reading, writing, and thinking skills a student controls. Moreover, responding to text in writing helps students establish important links between reading and writing that contribute to increased understandings, as well as increased student achievement.

THE READING RESPONSE JOURNAL

Incorporating Written Response to Reading in the Classroom

For many teachers, written response often occurs during independent reading, which may include students responding to novels or chapters in novels. Having students respond to reading through independent reading, especially through novels, is not necessarily an effective or efficient way to develop the skill of responding to reading. By tying written response to instruction using shorter pieces, teachers will have more opportunities for their students to make connections to narrative and expository elements; thus significantly impacting their comprehension. The following charts outline the elements of narrative and expository text that make up the basis for all text that students read and write.

Narrative Elements
Character
Plot
Setting
Significant Event (identifiable problem)
Beginning/Middle/End
Strong Descriptive Words (verbs, adjectives, adverbs)
Dialogue
Sensory Details (figurative language, similes, metaphors)

Expository Elements
A specific subject
A logical order
A table of contents
Illustration/Graphics
Descriptive headings
Detailed information

In this type of approach to written response, teachers' plans for reading instruction revolve around a written response question which focuses on a narrative or expository element. When teachers develop their questions prior to their students coming together for reading instruction, teachers not only scaffold students' thinking before and during the reading, but they'll bring more focus to the planning and implementation of their reading instruction. Let's look at how one fourth grade teacher uses the Reading Response Journal to develop his students' ability to comprehend the stories they are reading.

A Fourth Grade Lesson: Using the Reading Response Journal

The teacher in this class uses leveled readers as part of his instruction, especially when he's working with small groups. Some of his students are having trouble with metaphors and the teacher wants to get some conversation going about this focus. He has found a "short, sharp, snappy" reading piece that has a great metaphor and a storyline he thinks his students will enjoy. He has planned for a small group lesson which includes a written response question that he will use to have students develop a short written response in their Reading Response Journal. The question he has developed is, "What is the 'hurricane' that Crash talks about?" Due to the focus of his question, the teacher has decided the stopping point in the reading will be the third paragraph. At this particular point in the passage he can build the background needed for his students to understand the metaphor. As you read, notice how the teacher sets the students up to understand what the "hurricane" is and to answer the short written response question.

Teacher: (Before passing the reading passage out to his students) The title of the excerpt we're going to read is Crash Coogan. (Spinelli, 2008) What kind of piece do you think this will be—narrative or expository?

Tess: Expository

Mark: I think expository too.

Teacher: Why do you say that?

Mark: It sounds like a biography because it's a name.

Sam: Yeah, it sound like it could be about a racecar driver.

Teacher: Okay, so would you all agree that this could be an expository piece?

All Students: Yes, some nodding.

Teacher: (teacher passes out the reading passage to each student) Well, Let's see. If we read a little more we might be able to make a better prediction. Read the first paragraph and decide if you still think it's an expository piece.

Kaitlyn: Oh, no, it's a narrative. It's about someone who's going to run a race.

Teacher: Oh, so you're all thinking that running a race is the significant event (holding up a Fluent Text Features Card pointing to "significant event" on the narrative side)? (Matteson, 2009) Is that what you think makes this piece a narrative?

All Students: Nod heads.

Teacher: Okay, so we're thinking that this piece is a narrative and that it's going to be about running a race. Let's find out more about the significant event. Read the next two paragraphs and see if we can gain some insight into what's happening.

Sam: He's going to be in a relay race.

Teacher: Who's he?

Sam: I think it Crash Coogan but it hasn't told us. It just says "I".

Teacher: Yes, the piece is written in first person; so Crash is telling the story. What else did everyone find out about Crash?

Sean: He thinks he's the fastest.

Kaitlyn: Yes, because he's the fastest he thinks he'll get the baton.

Teacher: What's a baton?

Sean: It's the thing they pass to each other when they are running.

Teacher: What did you find out about Crash, Tess?

Tess: He wants to get all the "glory"?

Teacher: Yes, what's that all about? What does "glory" mean?

Mark: It means that when he wins he'll get all the attention.

Teacher: What kind of attention do you think he'll get?

Kaitlyn: Maybe he'll get his name in the paper.

Teacher: What else?

Sam: He might get a ribbon or a trophy.

Teacher: Anything else? What about the people who are watching the race?

Sean: They'll probably congratulate him.

Teacher: Yes, that may happen *after* the race but don't people also get excited during races? Races are pretty exciting aren't they? Don't people yell and cheer for those who are racing?

All Students: Nod their heads.

Teacher: Alright, this is a good place for us to stop today. I want you to finish reading the story on your own and when you're done (pointing to a question on the white board) I want you to answer this question in your Reading Response Journal. We'll discuss it next time we meet. Make sure to copy down the question as soon as you get back to your seat. It's not going to be up there forever.

This teacher understands how the Reading Response Journal can support his reading lessons and has developed a structure that drives all his work with small groups. This lesson was a good example of that structure. The lesson only lasted about 15 minutes. His aim was only to get his students started on the work that needed to be done; understanding metaphors. With the teaching point chosen, he picked an appropriate text, and then thought about a question that would drive the student's work. After developing a question, the teacher needed to think about how much teaching or support would need to occur to get them to understand the teaching point but not do all the work for them. He decided that the third paragraph (glory) was the "hint" that the students would need to figure out the metaphor. It's at this point that the students can go off and work independently. The evidence of their work and understanding will be their response to the question in the Reading Response Journal. Read on to see how the teacher continued the lesson on metaphors a few days later.

As part of their regularly scheduled reading time a few days later, the teacher calls the same group up again to finish the lesson. Without being asked, the students bring the text, pencils, and their Reading Response Journals to the table as they understand the routine and expectations the teacher has set for them. A response taken from one of the student's journal, can be found on page 5.

Teacher: How was the rest of the story?

Sam: I liked it. It was exciting.

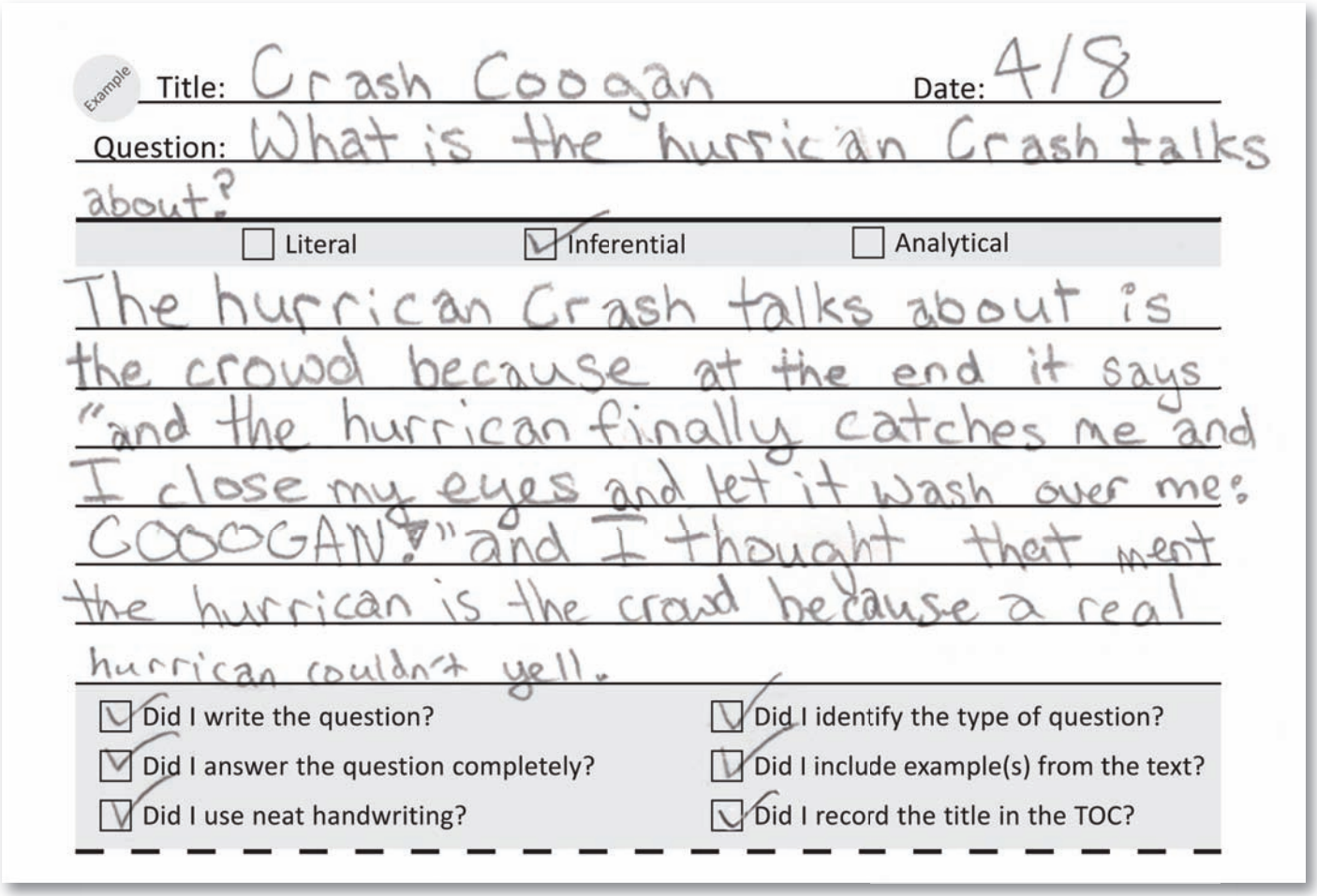
Teacher: What was exciting about it?

Tess: Everyone was yelling, "Coogan, Coogan!" because he was beating everyone.

Teacher: Can you read a part that shows him beating the other runners.

Tess: "By the time I hit the straightaway I'm passing the next-to-last runner, the next, and the next. Forty thousand people leap to their feet."

Teacher: That *does* sound exciting. I also like the part about "forty thousand people leaping to their feet". This might be a good time to talk about the responses



Example

Title: Crash Coogan Date: 4/8

Question: What is the hurrican Crash talks about?

☐ Literal ☑ Inferential ☐ Analytical

The hurrican Crash talks about is the crowd because at the end it says "and the hurrican finally catches me and I close my eyes and let it wash over me: COOOGAN!" and I thought that ment the hurrican is the crowd because a real hurrican couldn't yell.

☑ Did I write the question?
☑ Did I answer the question completely?
☑ Did I use neat handwriting?
☑ Did I identify the type of question?
☑ Did I include example(s) from the text?
☑ Did I record the title in the TOC?

you wrote in your journals. Who can remind us about the question you received the last time we were together? Sean?

Sean: "What is the 'hurricane' that Crash talks about?"

Teacher: Who wants to begin?

Mark: I will. I wrote, "The hurricane that Crash is talking about is the people at the race. He says, "The human hurricane is chasing me". I think that means that the people are yelling for him to beat the others.

Teacher: Yes, that's a good metaphor isn't it? What is being compared?

Mark: "A hurricane" and the people yelling for him.

Teacher: What kinds of things were they yelling?"

Mark: "He can't do it!"

Teacher: Would it have helped your response to include an example of what the people were yelling?

Mark: Yes.

Teacher: When you go back to your seat rewrite your response on a sticky note to include what the people yelled and see if that makes your response stronger. Let's hear from others? Kaitlyn, read your response, will you?

Kaitlyn: "The hurricane that Crash talks about is the crowd because at the end it says, "and the hurricane finally catches up to me and I close my eyes and let it wash over me: COOOOGAN!" and I thought that meant the hurricane is the crowd because a real hurricane can't yell."

Teacher: I like the example you chose to support your answer. It's a wonderful metaphor—can't you just picture him standing there and taking in the roar of the crowd? This is making me think about how important it is to choose the most powerful example from the story to support your answer. Why did you chose that example Kaitlyn?

Kaitlyn: Because it was when he won and when the crowd was screaming his name, they spelled it with a lot of O's, just like the wind…

Teacher: or like a hurricane? That's exactly what authors do to make key points; they use things like dialogue to help them paint a picture, or develop a metaphor. It's good to look for clues like that when finding evidence to support your reading responses.

The teacher continued discussing metaphors and giving feedback about improving their written responses to the rest of the students. It is obvious he understands that developing a student's skillfulness in responding to stories needs to be taught. He understands that developing a variety of written response questions (literal, Inferential, analytical) that reflect narrative or expository elements will help students better understand the skills he is trying to teach, as well as the stories they are reading. This teacher doesn't always go over entries in the journal during reading group. There are times he collects them and gives students feedback by using sticky notes as in the example in the Reading Response Journal. Occasionally, he'll have the students exchange journals and give feedback to each other. He uses this independent work as an assessment to check on his effectiveness of teaching students to write good responses.

This teacher handles the summary response entries the same way. He feels that some stories lend themselves better to writing summaries than others. This becomes his second focus when choosing books for teaching points, such as metaphors. He evaluates every story for its "summary worthiness". When he finds a story with a good storyline he may use it to teach his students how to write a good summary, even if he has already used it with students to write a short written response. Every three weeks or so, the teacher likes to have his students write a summary in their Reading response Journal. Sharing and extending their responses occurs in much the same way as the short written response in the example you just read. A summary response example can be found in the Reading Response Journal.

Getting Started with the Reading Response Journal

As previously stated, a critical aspect of written response is the question. However, developing questions doesn't have to be a difficult task. These questions can come from a variety of resources. One such resource is the teacher manual of any commercial basal. Generally speaking, basals have questions that have already been identified as literal, inferential, or analytical; making great written response questions for use in the Reading Response Journal. In this way, the Reading Response Journal can become a comprehension portfolio for a classroom that uses a basal.

For schools in states where written response is a component on their state test, another good resource for written response questions is the state website. Many states release test item questions, and written response for reading is no exception. The questions below are examples of state released items. Modeling your reading instruction questions after state written response questions is not only helpful in developing questions, it also gives students needed practice in answering test-like questions. The list of questions below has been categorized by important types of literary questions—character, setting, and significant event—making it helpful for teachers to choose "just-right" questions that can be models for questions to use in the Reading Response Journal.

Questions about Characters

How did the character change in the story? How did you know? Answer using specific information from the text, not just background knowledge.

What does the character say or do that tells what kind of person he or she is? What do these actions tell you about the person? Write a word to describe the character and be sure to use information from the story to support your answer.

How does the character feel when (particular event from the story) happens? Why does the character feel this way?

How does the character feel at the beginning of the story? Why? How does the character feel at the end of the story? Why?

How does the author let you know that the character was (happy, upset, angry, scared)? Use specific details from the story.

Describe what the character was like at the beginning of the story. Describe what the character was like at the end of the story.

Why was the character (happy, upset, angry, scared)? Give two reasons the character feels this way. Use evidence from the story.

What does the character mean when he says, "…..?" Use information from the article to explain your answer.

Describe the character's problem in the story and explain how he/she solves it. Be sure to use information from the story to support your answer.

Questions about Setting

When does the story take place? Does it happen in modern times?, in the future?, in the near past?, or in ancient times? Tell how you know using the information from the text.

Describe the climate where the event took place. Include two facts from the article to support your description.

How important was the setting to this story? Use important information from the story to support your answer.

What made the setting believable to you? Give a reason why and be sure to support your answer with details from the story.

Could the setting have taken place anywhere else? Why or why not? Support your answer with facts from the story.

Where would the author of (poem, article, story) like to live? Include two details from the (poem, article, story) to support your answer.

Questions about Significant Event

Describe the problem in the story. Be sure to use information from the story to support your answer.

What three important things happened in this story? Tell them in the order that they happened.

At what point did you know where the author was going? What events in the story were important in that decision?

Choose an event from the story that you thought was important. Justify why it was important with information from the story.

List two things that you would do if…

Sequence events in the story—ordering sentences to describe story events (adapted from CSAP, 2006)

CONCLUSION

Understanding the differences between the major aspects of writing—composing text and responding to text (written response)—can make a significant impact in both teachers' literacy instruction and students' learning. Teaching the how and why behind these two important instructional practices, not only deepens comprehension, but can result in increased student achievement. In order for this to occur, it is essential that teachers have the right instructional tools. The Reading Response Journal is an instructional tool that supports both teachers and students in better understanding written response. When used in conjunction with DMA's Text Features Cards, the Reading Response Journals can become an integral component of any reading program. In an additional effort to support teachers in developing a stronger writing program within their classrooms, a series of writing journals and teacher guides will be coming out in the spring of 2012.

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