What’s the point of this story?

We have all been afflicted with the tedious experience of being ensnared by a rambling storyteller, who persists with trudging us through a wearisome litany of events and details that apparently have no guiding focus, and ultimately, no real meaning for us. *Then she said . . . and he couldn’t find . . . so the two of them . . . just yesterday . . . they decided to . . . and so on.* Usually we listen politely, resolving to quickly change the subject when the opportunity presents itself, or perhaps even positioning ourselves for a quick exit. All the time we are thinking: “Why are you telling me this?”

Of course, stories can entertain us and provide indispensable moments of pleasure and diversion. But in addition, stories are also a timeless method of sharing ideas, insights, and understandings with each other. A well-told story can illustrate a truth, can prompt reflection and introspection, can challenge our preconceptions, can stimulate discussion and refinement of our thinking, can inspire us and move us to action, can change the way we understand ourselves and our world. Stories are a powerful way of communicating to us things we need to know.

But stories are also predominately an indirect method of delivering messages—as listeners and readers, it is often up to us to figure out just what a story is saying. What are we to make of this story? What does this story mean to its author? And what might this story mean to us? What’s the point of this story?

Our students encounter stories as an ongoing facet of their education. From their earliest years in school, as beginning readers, through high school and beyond, students transition into reading longer and more complex works of literature. And while they are often held accountable for relating what exactly transpired in a story, many times students may be scratching their heads, and thinking to themselves, “Why are you telling me this?”

The Strategy

Providing students with tools that help them “crack open” literary prose is essential for improving comprehension of this genre of written texts. Self-questioning strategies are especially effective for helping students build meaningful interpretations of fictional works.

Questioning the Author (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, and Kucan, 1997) offers a protocol for teaching self-questioning skills. QtA is a strategy that prompts students to pose a variety of comprehension questions that focus on the author of a work: *What does the author appear to be saying? What does the author assume readers already know? What does the author think is important? What does the author want readers to understand?*

In addition to these baseline QtAs, each academic discipline values sets of “insider questions” that experts within a field would address to delve deeper into written texts in their subject area. Insider questions of literary works such as short stories or novels, for example, contrast significantly with insider questions asked by historians about historical texts.

Step 1: Begin by differentiating stories that are narrative nonfiction, and stories that are literary fiction. Narrative nonfiction—such as biographies, autobiographies, and historical recountings—share many elements with literary fiction: characters, actions, a flow of events. However, narrative nonfiction generally presents a straightforward storyline, perhaps interspersed with author commentary, interpretation, and conclusions. Literary fiction, in contrast, may feature storylines that are less open and obvious. Authors of literary fiction tend to rely on the reader to make interpretations and draw conclusions, to construct a meaning of their message that is more implicit rather than explicitly stated.

A key difference, then, is author intent. Authors of narrative nonfiction usually attempt to directly tell what happened in a clearly outlined narration, often in order to support an interpretation of what these events mean to them. Authors of literary fiction create stories from their imagination that can help readers reflect upon and understand their lives in some way. But authors of literary fiction typically do not reveal everything; readers may need to infer some of what is going on in the story. As a result, readers are expected to develop their own interpretations of a story might mean, both to an author and especially to themselves.

Step 2: Introduce focusing questions for guiding understanding of short stories and novels. The Taxonomy of Self-Questioning for Literary Fiction (see chart) was developed to correspond to the revised Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives.

Comprehension of literary works begins with a series of questions that monitor whether the reader has grasped the basic story grammar of a fictional work: characters, setting, and plot. Because authors of literary fiction may place demands on readers to infer some of the key elements of a story, initially students need to self-check whether they can follow what is occurring in the story. These focusing questions correspond to the level of “remembering.”

In addition, literary fiction will examine conflict of some dimension: within a character, between characters, and in conjunction with larger forces, such as a struggle against some aspect of nature. Understanding literary fiction necessitates tracking how these conflicts unfold and are resolved. Furthermore, the dynamics between characters is very important for readers to perceive: how the characters feel about each other and how they interact with each other, and whether these
feelings and interactions change in any way. These focusing questions are represented on the level of “understanding.”

Step 3: As students clarify the basic story components, they transition to posing questions that help them interpret a fictional work as a form of communication. Focusing questions at the “applying” level delve students into using their own life experiences to connect to the work and to speculate why an author chooses to have characters behave in a certain way. At the “analyzing” level, students are encouraged to notice author’s craft and to ponder how the author’s use of literary devices—such as symbolism, an unreliable narrator, or figurative language—provides clues to what the story means to the author.

As students consider author “moves” in writing this story, students are cued to factor in author identity at the “evaluating” level. Who is telling them this story, and are there any indicators embedded in the text that suggest the perspective the author may be bringing to the work? In particular, sensitivity to emotional content is important, especially if the author signals personal attitudes about topics and events mentioned in the story.

Step 4: Finally, the culminating questions, at the “creating” level, emphasize: “What is the point of this story?” “Why is the author telling me this?” “What sense can I make of this story?”

Advantages

Providing students with models for self-questioning of literary fiction helps develop engaged readers who reach beyond merely registering the “facts” of the story and who extend their comprehension into understanding a story as a sophisticated form of communication.

• Students internalize habits of mind for raising questions that tap into increasingly complex levels of thinking;
• Students expect to generate their own questions about literary works rather than respond to questions developed by others;
• Students’ comprehension of a text factors in both their “read” of what an author is saying, as well as their personal interpretations of the meaning of a work.

Further Resources:

Beck, I., McKeown, M., Hamilton, R., & Kucan, L. (1997) Questioning The Author: An Approach For Enhancing Student Engagement With Text. International Reading Association, Newark, DE.

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Taxonomy Self-Questioning Chart for Literary Fiction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Thinking</th>
<th>Comprehension Statement</th>
<th>Focusing Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creating</td>
<td>I have developed an interpretation of what this story means.</td>
<td>Why is the author telling me this story? What theme or idea might the author be exploring in this story? What does this story mean to me?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluating</td>
<td>I can critically examine this author's story.</td>
<td>Who is the author and how has author perspective influenced the telling of this story? What does the author's choice of words indicate about what the author might be thinking? What emotions is the author eliciting? Does the author have an attitude, and if so, about what?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyzing</td>
<td>I can take my understanding to a deeper level.</td>
<td>What literary devices does the author use? What seems to be the purpose for using these literary devices?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applying</td>
<td>I can use my understanding in some meaningful way.</td>
<td>How can I connect this story to my life and experiences? Why might the author have the characters say, or do this? What point might the author be making about the characters' actions? Why might the author place the story in this setting?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>I can understand what the author is telling me.</td>
<td>How does the author have the characters interact with each other? How do the characters feel about each other? How do character feelings and interactions change? How does the author use conflict in this story? How does the author resolve this conflict?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remembering</td>
<td>I can follow what happens in this story.</td>
<td>Who are the characters? Where does the story take place? What are the major events of the story? What is the sequence of these events? What event initiates the action of the story?</td>
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