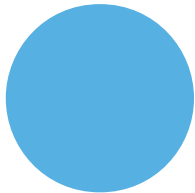


Cultivating Wonder



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FOR SUSAN PIMENTEL

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“Athlete of God”. *Blood Memories*. Martha Graham, first published in 1991 by Doubleday, a division of Bantam Doubleday.

“Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night”
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SO MUCH DEPENDS ON A GOOD QUESTION. A question invites students into a text or turns them away. A question provokes surprise or tedium. Some questions open up a text, and if followed, never let you see it the same way again.

Our efforts to improve reading in this country have hit a wall. For forty years, reading scores in the 8th grade are basically flat; more than half of the students within our care cannot read the complex texts they need to be ready for college and careers. We cannot expand opportunity if we do not tear down this wall. Rising to this challenge, more than forty states have recently adopted a shared set of literacy standards designed to ensure their students are truly prepared.

The Common Core State Standards challenge students to read like a detective and write like an investigative reporter. Cultivating these capacities will require investing in the craft of good questions. Excellence arises from the regular practice of work worth doing, reading things worth reading and asking questions worth answering.

This essay analyzes five questions about five different texts, inspired by the first five standards in reading. This essay is a little long and somewhat demanding because it takes time to dig into specific texts. Productive work with the standards must go beyond generalities to demonstrate how they might come to life with specific questions about particular texts. This exploration, I hope, will be useful to teachers and curriculum and assessment designers, but also to those parents and members of the public who want to not just hear about the standards but to live inside them for a while.

The first standard asks students to *“read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.”* Standard 1 emphasizes a rigorous, deductive approach to reading that challenges students to draw as much as possible from the text itself. It remains to us as educators to develop questions that show the power, or the reward, of reading closely this way.

To illustrate the power of looking closely and looking again, let’s reexamine one of the most famous beginnings of all, the opening of Hamlet. Our question is:

thought about it. Some students might have a general sense of Bernardo's tone, but almost none attend to the specifics of the scene as it unfolds.

Understanding the opening requires recognizing what a very strange thing has happened. It is a situation with which we are all very familiar. Every time we interact with a security guard and give our identification, we walk up to the guard at his station and show him who we are. In the beginning of *Hamlet*, though, Bernardo walks up to the guard and asks him who he is.

Francisco responds no, answer me—tell me who you are. I am the one asking the questions here. In fact, the very next lines show what a normal exchange of the guard should look like.

Francisco now proceeds to ask “Who’s there?” Shakespeare reenacts the opening lines and shows us the way things are supposed to go: The guard is supposed to ask “Who are you?” Horatio and Marcellus identify themselves as friends, and all proceeds smoothly. A careful reading of these opening lines recognizes that Bernardo has jumbled a very familiar routine—relieving Francisco from guard duty.

Now that the strangeness of Bernardo's opening move is becoming clear, the language further illuminates how Bernardo enters the play. Francisco says, “You come most carefully upon your hour.” Literally, Bernardo is full of care, and Francisco's use of this word provides a clear indication of Bernardo's tone and movements as he approaches his guard post. When combined with Bernardo's immediate desire to know whether Francisco “had a quiet guard,” along with his anxiety that his fellow watchmen “make haste” to join him, the evidence is clear: Bernardo is jittery, spooked. And to call him spooked is quite appropriate—we soon learn why. In the lines that follow, we will learn that Bernardo has twice seen a ghost.

What is extraordinary is that Shakespeare depicts Bernardo's fright not by having him walk out on stage and say, “I'm scared.” He constructs a scene where the most ordinary language—who's there—and the most ordinary interaction—a changing of the guard—expresses extraordinary unease. Shakespeare directs a situation in which the words and action break the expectations—shatter the order of things—enacting what jittery anxiety looks like in remarkably few words.

When we approach Shakespeare, we often think about difficult language; yet the words that open *Hamlet* are remarkably simple. The challenge is to pay attention. The only source of insight can be the words themselves, as well as the actions that they orchestrate on stage. The opening words of *Hamlet* should let a wide range

of students and audience members into the play, if we take the time to follow their lead. Once students have grasped the opening situation, they can later return to a deeper exploration of the language and wonder about such things as what “unfold” means throughout the play, and why it all begins with a question of “who’s there.”

To experience drama fully, readers must read with the alert eye and ear of a director or actor; if you are going to perform the play, the first choice you make is how to say the words “who’s there.” And, on first glance, Shakespeare does not tell you how. Reading Shakespeare well involves discerning how he gives directions in his script, not only in the words he uses but in the scenes and interactions he constructs.

Drama is a wonderful way to illustrate the power of the first standard in reading that focuses both on what the text says explicitly as well as what follows from the text. Rarely when we read a script does it explicitly state how one might say the words or direct the action. But by examining exactly what the script says and then making inferences from this evidence, the playwright’s art comes to light. The standards require students to read Shakespeare; now our shared task is to ensure they witness the drama, the action his language creates.

And, of course, the first standard is not only about students answering questions but asking them themselves. So many readers read over the lines of *Hamlet* and other plays and don’t realize they have not stopped to understand the scene that unfolds. The stronger readers become, the more they pause on their own to confirm that they see how each line follows from another. The classroom dialogue increasingly becomes a model for an internal conversation.

Shared standards in literacy provide a platform for innovation, sharing insights, and crafting and refining high-quality options. While the standards articulate the goals of what students need to know and be able to do, they do not prescribe the how: curriculum and teacher practice. This essay is meant to be suggestive rather than prescriptive, to explore questions and texts as a way to provide one picture of what the standards might look like in practice. Once we have examined a few specific questions and texts—like the scene from *Hamlet* above—we can then explore whether there are useful design principles for good questions.

As we transition to the second standard, let’s keep in mind that Standard 1 will remain in play throughout each of the reading standards that follows. Standard 1 focuses on the command of evidence in what is read, and students must continue draw on evidence as they examine the ideas, structure or style of any text.

The second standard traces the development of ideas through texts. Reading Standard 2 asks students to “*determine central ideas or themes of the text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.*” It is worth noticing that the second reading standard does not ask students merely to restate or determine the theme but rather to analyze its development. Themes are not frozen statements but ideas that develop or unfold over the course of the text. Rather than finding a single theme, the standard asks students to determine central ideas or themes, emphasizing that often ideas interact in texts and refine one another.

With the second standard in mind, let’s explore the dancer Martha Graham’s remarkable essay “An Athlete of God.” Graham produced this essay in response to a famous invitation to declare “what you most believe,” to express the core principles that guide her life. In examining her answer, let’s consider the following question:

How does the idea of practice unfold in Martha Graham’s “An Athlete of God”?

An Athlete of God

I believe that we learn by practice. Whether it means to learn to dance by practicing dancing, or to learn to live by practicing living, the principles are the same. In each, it is the performance of a dedicated, precise set of acts, physical or intellectual, from which come shape of achievement, the sense of one’s being, the satisfaction of spirit. One becomes in some area an athlete of God. Practice means to perform over and over again, in the face of all obstacles, some act of vision, of faith, of desire. Practice is a means of inviting the perfection desired.

I think the reason dance has held such an ageless magic for the world is that it has been the symbol of the performance of living. Many times, I hear the phrase, “the dance of life.” It is close to me for a very simple and understandable reason. The instrument through which the dance speaks is also the instrument through which life is lived: the human body. It is the instrument by which all the primaries of experience are made manifest. It holds in its memory all matters of life and death and love.

Dancing appears glamorous, easy, delightful. But the path to the paradise of that achievement is not easier than any other. There is fatigue so great that the body cries even in its sleep. There are times of complete frustration. There are daily small deaths. Then, I need all the comfort that practice has

stored in my memory and the tenacity of faith. But it must be the kind of faith that Abraham had, wherein he “staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief.”

It takes about ten years to make a mature dancer. The training is twofold. There is the study and practice of the craft in order to strengthen the muscular structure of the body. The body is shaped, disciplined, honored, and in time, trusted. The movement becomes clean, precise, eloquent, truthful. Movement never lies. It is a barometer telling the state of the soul’s weather to all who can read it. This might be called the law of the dancer’s life, the law which governs its outer aspects.

Then, there is the cultivation of the being. It is through this that the legends of the soul’s journey are retold with all their gaiety and their tragedy and the bitterness and sweetness of living. It is at this point that the sweep of life catches up the mere personality of the performer, and while the individual—the undivided one—becomes greater, the personal becomes less personal. And there is grace. I mean the grace resulting from faith ... faith in life, in love, in people, in the act of dancing. All this is necessary to any performance in life which is magnetic, powerful, rich in meaning.

In a dancer there is a reverence for such forgotten things as the miracle of the small beautiful bones and their delicate strength. In a thinker there is a reverence for the beauty of the alert and directed and lucid mind. In all of us who perform, there is an awareness of the smile, which is part of the equipment, or gift, of the acrobat. We have all walked the high wire of circumstance at times. We recognize the gravity of pull on the Earth as he does. The smile is there because he is practicing living at that instant of danger. He does not choose to fall.

Our question of how practice unfolds in Graham’s essay follows directly from what she has written. From the first line, practice lies at the center of her thought—it is what she believes in. Or more precisely, she believes that is how we learn. So the first thing we may observe is that, for Graham, there is no learning without practice.

As the sentences of the first paragraph unfold, we gather more about what Graham means by practice. First, she extends it beyond what we normally think about practicing—from dancing, which obviously requires practice, to living, which we do not always think of as an activity we practice. Practice pervades all we try to do well—“the principles are the same”—guiding the practice of life and activities within it. The word *principles* is worth pausing over, an example

of a widely used academic vocabulary word that is worthy of students exploring and understanding.

So what are the principles, or rules of practice? We learn that they include a commitment to precision and repetition. (But those repeated acts include mental as well as physical ones). Graham's writing becomes more abstract and mysterious as she describes the results of this practice: from practice emerges "shape of achievement, the sense of one's being, the satisfaction of spirit. One becomes in some area an athlete of God." It is not immediately clear what she means; somehow she connects an everyday activity like practice to matters of spirit and faith—an athlete not of a sport but an "athlete of god."

The questions we begin with lead to more questions, often smaller questions that linger over a curious moment or detail in a text. While we began with a broad question about how the idea of practice develops, as we move through the text we linger over the specific sentences and steps in her thought. The hunt of a classroom conversation involves following the leads questions provoke, including questions that students ask.

The mystery of what Graham means can be illuminated only by further reading. Students need to practice the discipline of pausing and considering when authors say something unusual. Teaching often involves getting students to shift from quickly passing over such moments to pausing to cultivate wonder, to regard mysterious moments in a text not as a cause for frustration but an invitation to thought. Only such wonder sustains students through the challenging work of looking and looking again at difficult moments in the text until they become clearer.

The first paragraph yields a little more about the principles of practice. To practice means not only to engage repeatedly in a set of precise acts, but to do so in "the face of all obstacles"—introducing the notion of persistence in the face of resistance or pain. Graham expands on these obstacles in the third paragraph: "Dancing appears glamorous, easy, delightful. But the path to the paradise of that achievement is not easier than any other. There is fatigue so great that the body cries even in its sleep. There are times of complete frustration. There are daily small deaths." Note the intensity of the pain described here ("cries even in its sleep," "complete frustration," "daily small deaths"). These are words to remember when someone tells you that learning is nothing but fun.

In the third paragraph of her essay, Graham links practice to other ideas, including comfort and faith. Despite the pain, practice offers "comfort," more precisely, "comfort that practice has stored in my memory," the comfort borne

from having repeatedly practiced through the pain. Graham also links practice to faith, which she did in the first paragraph, when she described practice as “some act of ... faith.” For Graham, it appears that faith includes the practice of not turning away in the face of that which is overwhelming or awe inspiring, it is not to have “staggered” in the face of something stronger than ourselves. Graham begins by saying we can only learn by practice. Perhaps for her, it is also the only way to achieve faith and grace.

Perhaps Graham’s essay invites her readers into practice of all sorts of things, including the repeated act of reading in the face of the frustrations and possibilities of mystery. And there is no road to “the paradise of that achievement” of understanding what might be at stake in Graham’s ideas, except by immersing ourselves in the movement of her thought.

Standard 3 asks students to “analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of the text.” Standard 3 alerts readers to the interactions that forge ideas and stories. Once again, the standards emphasize analysis of the causes and patterns of how things interact “over the course of the text” rather than a static account.

To explore the power of interactions to reveal character and the development of ideas, let’s look at a centerpiece of classic American fiction: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Since the standards require the study of classic works of American 18th-, 19th- and early 20th-century fiction, it is almost inevitable that students will encounter Twain’s masterwork. Focusing on the opening chapter, let’s consider the following question:

What is the role of Tom Sawyer in the first chapter of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*?

YOU don’t know about me without you have read a book by the name of “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,” but that ain’t no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing. I never seen anybody but lied one time or another, without it was Aunt Polly, or the widow, or maybe Mary. Aunt Polly—Tom’s Aunt Polly, she is—and Mary, and the Widow Douglas is all told about in that book, which is mostly a true book, with some stretchers, as I said before.

Now the way that the book winds up is this: Tom and me found the money that the robbers hid in the cave, and it made us rich. We got six

thousand dollars apiece—all gold. It was an awful sight of money when it was piled up. Well, Judge Thatcher he took it and put it out at interest, and it fetched us a dollar a day apiece all the year round—more than a body could tell what to do with. The Widow Douglas she took me for her son, and allowed she would sivilize me; but it was rough living in the house all the time, considering how dismal regular and decent the widow was in all her ways; and so when I couldn't stand it no longer I lit out. I got into my old rags and my sugar-hogshead again, and was free and satisfied. But Tom Sawyer he hunted me up and said he was going to start a band of robbers, and I might join if I would go back to the widow and be respectable. So I went back.

.....

Now she had got a start, and she went on and told me all about the good place. She said all a body would have to do there was to go around all day long with a harp and sing, forever and ever. So I didn't think much of it. But I never said so. I asked her if she reckoned Tom Sawyer would go there, and she said not by a considerable sight. I was glad about that, because I wanted him and me to be together.

Miss Watson she kept pecking at me, and it got tiresome and lonesome. By and by they fetched the niggers in and had prayers, and then everybody was off to bed. I went up to my room with a piece of candle, and put it on the table. Then I set down in a chair by the window and tried to think of something cheerful, but it warn't no use. I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead. The stars were shining, and the leaves rustled in the woods ever so mournful; and I heard an owl, away off, who-whooping about somebody that was dead, and a whippowill and a dog crying about somebody that was going to die; and the wind was trying to whisper something to me, and I couldn't make out what it was, and so it made the cold shivers run over me. Then away out in the woods I heard that kind of a sound that a ghost makes when it wants to tell about something that's on its mind and can't make itself understood, and so can't rest easy in its grave, and has to go about that way every night grieving. I got so down-hearted and scared I did wish I had some company. Pretty soon a spider went crawling up my shoulder, and I flipped it off and it lit in the candle; and before I could budge it was all shriveled up. I didn't need anybody to tell me that that was an awful bad sign and would fetch me some bad luck, so I was scared and most shook the clothes off of me. I got up and turned around in my tracks three times and crossed my breast every time; and then I tied up a little lock of my hair with a thread to keep witches away. But I hadn't no confidence. You do that when you've lost a horseshoe that you've found, instead of nailing it up over the

door, but I hadn't ever heard anybody say it was any way to keep off bad luck when you'd killed a spider.

I set down again, a-shaking all over, and got out my pipe for a smoke; for the house was all as still as death now, and so the widow wouldn't know. Well, after a long time I heard the clock away off in the town go boom-boom-boom—twelve licks; and all still again—stiller than ever. Pretty soon I heard a twig snap down in the dark amongst the trees — something was a stirring. I set still and listened. Directly I could just barely hear a “me-yow! me-yow!” down there. That was good! Says I, “me-yow! me-yow!” as soft as I could, and then I put out the light and scrambled out of the window on to the shed. Then I slipped down to the ground and crawled in among the trees, and, sure enough, there was Tom Sawyer waiting for me.

It's easy to start on the question of Tom's role in the first chapter because Tom appears in the first sentence. As the first two paragraphs unfold, we learn that Huck's adventures build on those he has already had with Tom, in which they made a killing. But at the end of the second paragraph, Tom undertakes a new action that didn't happen in the last book. Huck has run away from the widow's home and he is “free and satisfied” until Tom intervenes: “But Tom Sawyer he hunted me up and said he was going to start a band of robbers, and I might join if I would go back to the widow and be respectable. So I went back.” Tom becomes more than a fellow rogue in this sentence; this game serves to pull Huck back into the orbit of the widow and be “respectable.”

Tom fades from view until the conversation turns to heaven and hell. Huck enrages the widow by claiming he would rather live in hell, and she responds by describing heaven. Huck does not answer but only asks if Tom would be in heaven; she says “not by a considerable sight.” Huck is relieved that he is on the path to hell because “I wanted him and me to be together.” The exchange deepens the bond between Huck's path and Tom's path; Huck wants to go where Tom is going.

Tom appears in person in the last line of the chapter where he is waiting for Huck. It is worth noticing the extent to which Tom is woven throughout the structure of the opening: He appears in the first line and last. Tom frames the introduction to Huck. Authors often give cues as to what questions are most worth asking; the question about Tom's role in Chapter 1 arises when we notice Twain's emphasis. Clearly, Tom exerts a shaping role, but what kind of role? In order to see the force of Tom's final entrance at the end of the chapter, we need to look at the very peculiar interlude before Tom appears in the flesh.

The second to last paragraph before the final entrance of Tom marks a striking change in tone. The beginning of *Huck Finn* is often funny, a familiar tug between a moralistic widow and a rebellious boy, deepened by class differences. But the mood changes significantly when Huck goes to his room alone. Suddenly intimations of death haunt Huck. What was once restlessness to escape the widow becomes an intense loneliness and even despair. The language shifts to a mournful strain reflected in the animal's keening sounds. We have gone from comedy to mourning in Chapter 1.

Sounds interrupt the deathly stillness, first the breaking of a twig and then a playful animal sound. Tom's entrance dispels the gathering dark: Huck exclaims, "That was good!" and finds Tom Sawyer waiting for him. The darkness of what comes highlights the joy of Tom's entrance—he appears like a bright angel that lightens the gloom. This angel remains cloaked in childhood games; Tom rescues Huck with a call of "me-yow!"—his way of saying "come out and play with me."

In order to witness Tom's force in the first chapter, we need to pay attention to structure and how the text unfolds; Tom's role intensifies from partner in crime to a rescuer of sorts. But we also need to grasp the interaction of Tom with the setting; it is the background of darkness which lends Tom his light. And, of course, we must attend to what Tom's role reveals about Huck, since this is a book about Huck Finn, after all.

One final reason that attending to Tom's role at the beginning of *Huck Finn* pays off is that Tom reenters near the end of the novel. One of the most striking developments of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is the final diminished stature of Tom Sawyer. Tom enters awkwardly near the end of the novel and offers very little—he is merely childish. The smallness of Tom at the end of the book shows how much Huck has grown. Linger over the opening chapter paves the way for a deeper appreciation of the movement of the novel as a whole.

The fourth standard moves to a smaller unit of analysis, the meaning of a word or phrase. Standard 4 asks students to "*interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning and tone.*" In high school, Standard 4 requires students reading literary nonfiction to "*analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of the text.*" For a standard that celebrates the power of word choice, there is perhaps no text more fitting for study than the Gettysburg Address, which says so much in so few words. Let's look at one word and ask:

How does Lincoln use and refine the meaning of the word “dedicate” over the course of the Gettysburg Address?

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

This question arises not from our preoccupations before reading the text but instead responds to the preoccupation in Lincoln’s words and makes it our own. An earlier question might have been: *What word does Lincoln use most often in the address?* It turns out he uses *dedicate* six times in his short speech. Perhaps an editor would have told Lincoln to mix it up a bit. Our question expresses simple wonder—why does Lincoln use *dedicate* so often in so short a space? How is *dedicate* so central to what he is doing at Gettysburg and in this address? Does the meaning of *dedicate* stay the same, or gain new resonance in its repeated use?

The first two times Lincoln uses the word *dedicate* he ties it closely to the word *conceive*:

“conceived in Liberty and dedicated to the proposition”
“every nation so conceived and so dedicated”

In these two initial uses, *dedicate* involves the reason for starting something. *Dedicate* here resembles the word *cause*, the cause for which the country is founded. Lincoln declares this cause in the ringing first sentence: “the proposition that all men are created equal.”

The next two times Lincoln uses *dedicate* he again links it to a word he repeats; this time *consecrate*. Dedication becomes tied to consecration, to declaring a place holy. Now *dedicate* takes on a sense of investing a place with special, spiritual significance. But it is not any holy place, but one rendered sacred by sacrifice, a funeral ground hallowed by those “who gave their lives that that nation might live.” The word *dedicate* began Lincoln’s address as a word about beginnings and now becomes associated with loss and endings. The commitment of dedication in the opening sentences has deepened; the dedication to the cause of the nation is now inextricably linked to the dedication of the field. It is now a cause worth dying for.

In his final two uses of *dedicate*, Lincoln again forges a connection between *dedicate* and another word he repeats twice: *devotion*.

“It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion.”

The entrance of the word *devotion* makes dedication more intimate and personal. Devotion goes beyond believing in something to loving it, to an individual commitment to it. Over the course of the text, *dedication* becomes invested with deepening and more personal meaning, until by the end it calls on all its listeners to pledge their dedication—to devote themselves. Not only does the meaning of the word unfold, but the actors change. First, the founders of the country dedicate themselves to a proposition, then the soldiers dedicate themselves through their sacrifice, and finally those listening rededicate themselves to freedom.

Examining the word *dedicate* immerses us in the structure of the text. We witness the repeated pattern whereby Lincoln matches two uses of *dedicate* with two linked words. As *dedicate* unfolds in the text, so does time. The initial dedication is in the past, the dedication of the country. The second dedication is in the

present—the consecration of the funeral ground that happens the day of the address. The final dedication is to the future, the devotion going forward to preserve these ideals. Examining the word’s movement reveals the movement of the text itself.

Examining *dedicate* in this way also opens up so much additional vocabulary to students. They are studying networks of words and related meanings rather than a word in isolation. By systematically linking the meaning of *dedicate* to other words, Lincoln shows how words can be used to define one another. What is particularly valuable is that students studying Lincoln’s language will learn academic vocabulary that pervades many complex texts, words whose meanings often change in different contexts. It is perhaps strange to see the *Gettysburg Address* as a master class in vocabulary, but Lincoln is instructing a country in words and ideas that matter.

The standards require the study of the U.S. founding documents and the great conversation they inspire, including Lincoln. A deep examination of these texts provides not only a foundation for citizenship but a widely applicable body of knowledge and language. Perhaps one of the most powerful resources within the standards is the potential of these remarkable documents to enable a generation of Americans to read well and learn what our language can do.

It may be worth pausing for a moment and comparing the question about the role of *dedicate* to typical questions for discussing Lincoln’s *Address*. For example, one might ask, “What is Lincoln’s purpose in the speech?” Or one might say, “What is the structure of the speech?” Or “What is the main idea of the speech? Give three supporting details.” All of these questions are generic; none of them arise from a specific encounter from this text. More important, they are at once more complicated, less rewarding, and more open to cliché and canned responses. Discussing the purpose of the speech leaves available to students options such as—“to convince his listeners to support freedom”—a true statement but one that flattens the address. To give this answer, no one needs to read the address with care. One can describe the structure of the speech as a “funeral oration,” but once again, you only need a couple of words from the text to make that pronouncement.

Instead, following the word *dedicate* gives us profound insight into Lincoln’s specific purposes and the structure of the address. It is not a terrible summation of the purpose of the speech to say that Lincoln binds his listeners to a new dedication—to move from the promising dedication of their country, to the present dedication to a cause that ennobles the dead, to the personal dedication of his listeners that invests them in the future. The structure of the *Gettysburg*

Address reveals itself in the movement of this word and the words to which it is connected. Our investigation of a single word has opened up structure and purpose—which are addressed by Standards 5 and 6 in the reading standards. While a single standard, in this case Standard 4, may prompt a question, the standards are connected intimately and will draw upon one another when reading; one rarely works on any standard in isolation.

While the question about *dedicate* is a profound question, it is also a simple one in that it allows a wider range of students to get started. It begins with counting the most often used word. Students then can work locally on the meaning of *dedicate* before being asked for big pronouncements; they earn big ideas rather than being asked to pull them prematurely from the text.

So it is not that structure and purpose don't matter; rather, it's that the general questions so often put in front of students just don't work. Generic questions that may seem deep often put teachers and students into automatic pilot rather than the alert attentiveness that real reading requires. A superficial alignment to the standards is not enough; we need to design questions that illuminate each text to realize the rigor and depth the standards make possible and truly require.

Poems are often built on structure, which is the focus of Standard 5. And perhaps there is no lyric structure more formatted and demanding than the villanelle, which requires the poet to repeat so often and yet make something happen in the poem. Great villanelles are extremely rare, yet two poets wrote unforgettable ones within a relatively short span of time, which offers us the opportunity to explore the triumph of a mastery of structure.

Standard 5 asks students to “analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.” This standard moves beyond asking students to identify the structure of texts to examining how the structure works within each text; how each line or stanza of a poem builds on one another and fits together. With this standard in mind, let us then ask:

In *“Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night,”* Dylan Thomas repeats the same lines throughout his poem, while in *“One Art,”* Elizabeth Bishop changes the lines she repeats. What is the impact of the difference?

Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night

—DYLAN THOMAS 1951

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

One Art

—ELIZABETH BISHOP 1977

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster,

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write* it!) like disaster.

The similarity of the two poems' structures leaps off the page. The poems have the same shape, number of lines and rhyme scheme. Most strikingly, similar patterns of repetition and repeated lines haunt both poems. The next obvious similarity emerges from the content; both poems are elegies, or poems about loss and death.

Bishop is more playful with the third line of her first stanza, "to be lost that their loss is no disaster," rendering it slightly differently each time she repeats it. By comparing her effort to Thomas's, we see that he is stricter in repeating the first and third line of his poem throughout. "Do not go gentle into that good night" and "Rage, rage against the dying of the light" anchor his poem like pillars.

It is striking how Bishop's poem is so similar in structure but so different in tone. Her poem has a "joking voice" until the very end, like the lover she mourns. Dylan's unflinching gaze stares into death and does not look back.

There is a more subtle similarity in the structure of the two poems that likely emerges only after careful study. In both poems, the last stanza begins with a breathtaking direct address:

"And you, my father, there on the sad height"

"—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture"

Both of these lines take your head off. They are at once surprising and devastating. We read through Dylan's grand statements on life and death to learn suddenly that he is talking about his father. Elizabeth Bishop takes us on a hilarious spiral of ever-expanding loss only to arrive at the singular loss of her lover. It is like a roller coaster stopped short.

The force of this last loss breaks the pattern of structure in "One Art." Bishop strictly keeps the form when she repeats the line "The art of losing isn't hard to master" three times in the poem; she breaks the exact repetition once—in the last stanza. In the wake of her final loss, the repetition falters with the addition of the single, small word *too*, "the art of losing's not too hard to master." Never has "not too hard" been so very hard.

Sometimes we see the force of structure most clearly when a poet breaks it. Patterns create expectations, and authors can reinforce, refine or shatter. Part of teaching is making students alert to surprises that they can otherwise pass over. Poets and authors do not announce when they break patterns and expectations—it takes an alert reader who notices, who pays attention.

Dylan Thomas's first line begins by upsetting expectations. It is an everyday event to wish that someone sleep well and have a good night. The command "Do not go gentle into that good night" opens the poem with a bang, reversing this typical nighttime comfort. Thomas's use of *gentle* is also surprising; we might expect him to use the adverb *gently* since he seems to be describing an action. However, what becomes clear is that Thomas is not talking about how you go into that night but who you are when you go. The poem enumerates four different types of people and where they stand at their end.

Another way to alert students to structure is to ask of a poem, play or novel what would happen if something were removed or changed. For example, both of

these poems would be very different without their last stanza. A change in the repetition of one line shifts the entire structure of Bishop's poem. Understanding structure includes understanding the force or role of each component within it, and how it builds toward the whole.

Comparing the structure of "Do Not Go Gentle" and "One Art" is more than an academic exercise. There is no doubt that Bishop had Thomas's great poem in mind when she wrote "One Art." Poets are extremely attentive to form. They are alert to who wrote the last great sonnet, who conquered a form as demanding as a villanelle. Both poets turn to you at the end of their poems. By following Thomas's bold use of direct address, Bishop doffs her cap to a previous master, even as her own poem becomes personal and intimate. And this is where this essay turns to you, the reader, and the kinds of questions you might ask.

Seven principles have guided the development of questions in this essay. These are not design principles for all questions—there are other types of good questions not featured here. But if our aim is to design questions that plunge students into a text, seven things may be worth bearing in mind.

- 1 **Beginnings matter and are often worthy of sustained attention.** Many of the questions in this essay focus on how a work begins. When an author starts writing on the blank page, all possibilities are open—but the first words reflect choices that carve out the world of the text. Authors consider carefully how and where to begin, so a great way into their thinking and craft is to observe the beginning closely. A careful, slower examination of a beginning also allows students to get into the text to grasp its rhythm before ranging over it more broadly. Aristotle says "the beginning is thought to be more than half of the whole." A student who understands how a text opens stands ready to follow how it unfolds.
- 2 **Great questions follow the author's lead.** Good questions begin in humility. They assume that what is within the text is more interesting than whatever was on our mind before we read. Preconceptions are the enemy of the discovery of an author's distinct voice and ideas. Often what the author has written is our best guide to good questions; authors signal that a word is important through repetition; they break patterns to illuminate them. Following Martha Graham, the only path to the achievement of a good question is the practice of reading carefully.
- 3 **Great questions make the text the star of the classroom; the most powerful evidence and insight for answering lies within the text or texts being read.** Most good questions are text dependent and text specific. They reflect a love

or reverence for the text at hand, and they demand that attention be paid to what is most interesting and worth discovering within it. There are some good general questions. It is almost always interesting to ask: Why this word and not another? Why did the author choose to begin here? What would happen if this section of the text were removed (or what is the contribution of this sentence to the argument)? What exactly did the author mean by this? Or simply, I find this mysterious or confusing—what do you think? But most good questions are text specific; they follow from a feature of the text at hand. Some good questions force students to go beyond the text for answers, but it is almost always more powerful (and respectful of an author’s work) first to immerse oneself in the world of the text.

- 4 **Great questions have a simplicity that allows students to get started by observing and gathering evidence and gradually to earn larger insights and ideas.** Truly deep questions are often very simple—though the text is complex; questions themselves don’t have to be complicated to unearth richness and complexity. One sign of a good question is that it is not too hard to get started. Beginning a discussion of the *Gettysburg Address* by asking what word Lincoln uses most often allows a wide range of students to engage. By then examining how *dedicate* unfolds in the Gettysburg Address, students gradually observe Lincoln’s larger ideas about America. Good questions encourage readers to begin with things they can see and to look deeper.
- 5 **Great questions provoke a sense of mystery and provide a payoff in insight that makes the work of reading carefully worth it.** Good questions break the smooth exterior of the text and invite students to investigate it more deeply. All of us tend to read over things until we press ourselves to pay closer attention; the best questions sharpen that attentiveness. To ask in what tone of voice Bernardo speaks provokes mystery; it positions students to read like a detective and see what clues they can find. But what is important is that the search has results, treasures worth seeking. This depends foremost on the quality of the text itself—only well-crafted and deep things are worth looking at closely. But a question should also follow a thread that leads to insight or even surprise; it should make reading worth it.
- 6 **Great questions and follow-up questions draw on the advantages of students reading together by sharing what they have noticed and seen.** Henry James says that a writer should aspire to be someone “on whom nothing is lost.” This is a demanding ideal for a writer, or a reader, because all of us miss things when we read. But what is wonderful about a classroom is that we can gather together to read, to see more than we can on our own. The classroom becomes a place where details and evidence matter, where students follow and debate leads, like

fellow detectives. Good follow-up questions from either the teacher or students sustain the shared inquiry. As a group and as individuals, students practice becoming more alert to curious details in the text and inquisitive about them. Part of the excitement of such teaching is that with a rich text, there is always room to see more, for surprise. Great questions show their power in the pleasure of seeing something new and the gratitude of learning from someone else.

- 7 **Some great questions do not follow these principles and some may even break them.** The principles and questions outlined in this essay are meant to be evocative rather than comprehensive. Some great questions provoke arguments and force students to confront their own assumptions and beliefs. Some great questions ask students to apply what they have gleaned from a text to solve problems or design solutions. Sometimes questions need to provoke students to go beyond the text to additional sources, for example to evaluate the evidence or opinions presented by the text. Once again, what the author has written often offers us a guide as to what we might read next. For example, when Martin Luther King mentions Socrates throughout his Letter from Birmingham Jail, King gives his readers a strong indication that encountering Socrates would provide insight into his thought and action.

Perhaps one thing to keep in mind is the order in which we ask questions. Most questions that move beyond the text are richer after students have first deeply immersed themselves in the world of a text. Additionally, it is a mistake to assume that it is always “higher order” to go beyond a text and evaluate an author’s view, or always more demanding to compare one text to another text. Sometimes the most difficult and rewarding work is paying precise attention to a single text and observing exactly what an author has done, as C.S. Lewis says, “to look and go on looking until one sees exactly what is there.”

Good questions and texts worth reading are at the heart of students taking pleasure in the challenging work of reading complex texts. Designing good questions is critical to motivating students to dig deeper; it is work and it evokes natural resistance. Students can conspire to avoid the demanding attention to the details and fall back on ready-made comments.

But while it is challenging work to read and think well, it is important to emphasize the many ways in which it is easy and natural for students and teachers to be curious and pay attention. When students talk about a movie, the remarks they make and questions they ask often have a refreshing ease: Did you see that? *Could you believe it when that happened?* —and perhaps—*Did you see how the*

director or actor did that? We may make reading more difficult than it needs to be by not spending more time noticing and wondering about what is read—losing ourselves in simple questions like: *What exactly is going on here?* Texts may be complex, but the most beautiful questions are often simple, squarely within the grasp of teachers and students.

Perhaps the greatest misconception about the standards is that only very few teachers or students can do the work they require. A very different way to look at the standards is as an opportunity for a far broader range of teachers and students to find reading a range of texts fascinating and rewarding. The kinds of questions we design will be critical to inviting people in.

The literature and literary nonfiction in this essay would likely be read in high school years, but similar work could be done for texts appropriate to earlier grades as well as readings in other areas such as social studies, history, science, and technical subjects. While this essay explores individual texts, additional work should be done to design thoughtful sequences of texts that build coherent knowledge within and across grades.

At stake in good questions is not just reading well but delivering the opportunity to engage in conversations with the finest minds and artists. We can no longer talk to Dr. Martin Luther King, but if we immerse ourselves in what he has written, follow each move of his thought and words, we begin to weave his language and ideas into our own fiber. Good questions give students access to the greatest teachers of all, the texts in front of them. Only reading that plunges into the thoughts of others makes all the great teachers truly available, as models for our own thought, knowledge, writing, and action.

In our time, the technology of interruption has outpaced the technology of concentration. We are going to need to discover new and powerful ways to motivate all students to achieve the sustained attention and repeated practice reading well requires. Perhaps the most important breakthrough technology will be good questions. Let's all press ourselves to find the great questions already made, craft new ones, test them with students and share the best of them.

What do you think is a magnificent text and a question worth answering about it?

If you love great text and questions, please visit cultivatingwonder.org.

We are just beginning to design a place for teachers to share texts worth reading and questions worth asking.