

# Close Reading & Grammar Gallery: *A Perfect Fit*

*Reading, especially at the advanced levels, requires students to do more than simply decode a text. They must engage in what educators call “close reading.”*

*By Roberta Stathis, Ph.D.*

When students read closely, they not only grasp the meaning of individual words, sentences, and paragraphs, but also become attuned to the nuances and connotations of the text. These nuances and connotations are revealed in many different ways—through vocabulary, syntax, thematic elements, point of view, and the use of literary devices. Close readers must attend to the linguistic, semantic, structural, and cultural aspects of a text, a skill that requires more than a superficial reading of a text. In fact, it requires the opposite. Students must read and reread a text many times to uncover all the work has to reveal. Close reading is an approach to reading that can be extremely complex, which underscores why students need a great deal of practice in order to master the skills of close reading.



Grammar Gallery's Reading Gallery includes more than 300 readings, any one of which can be a springboard for you to use to help your students develop and refine their close reading skills. Here's a suggested sequence, keeping in mind that only the most advanced students will continue all the way through Step 4:

- 1. READ AND DESCRIBE:** Select a reading in Grammar Gallery's Reading Gallery and have students read it individually, in pairs, or as part of a whole-class activity. Then ask questions that lead students to describe what they have just read: *Was the text fiction or nonfiction? What was it about? What was the main idea or purpose? Who is the author? When do you think the text was written? Who is the intended audience? ...* and so forth.
- 2. REREAD AND THINK:** Have student read the text again, but this time guide their reading with questions such as the following: *What can you infer from the text? What is the author's point of view? Why does the author use certain words or sentence structures? Is the author trying to convince you of something, teach you a lesson, or get you to like or dislike a person or character? How does the author do that? What words or sentences surprised you? Why? What literary devices did the author use? ...* and so forth.

## Popul Vuh

The Popul Vuh is a written account of the ancient Maya. This 9,000-line poem reveals important information about the lives and culture of the Maya civilization. By the time the Spanish arrived in the “New World” in the early 1500s, the golden age of the Maya civilization had already faded. The incredible temples, pyramids, and other structures the Maya built give testimony to their civilization, but it seemed as if the intangible aspects of Maya culture would not be accessible anymore. However, the descendants of the Maya, the Quiche people of the highlands of Guatemala, still carried on the Maya traditions. The songs and stories that came to be part of the Popul Vuh originally were told orally. The Quiche wrote down these songs and stories in the Popul Vuh, which means “Council Book.” Many accounts of the Maya civilization are written from the perspective of the conquering Spaniards, but the Popul Vuh is special because it is written from the perspective of the Maya themselves.

The original version of the Popul Vuh was lost, but copies of it have survived. In the excerpt below, you can read the Maya's creation story. As you read this excerpt, think about how it compares with other creation stories you know or have heard about.



Before the world was created, Calm and Silence were the great kings that ruled. Nothing existed, there was nothing... There was only motionless sea, and a great emptiness of sky. There were no men anywhere, or animals, no birds or fish, no crabs. Trees, stones, caves, grass, forests, none of these existed yet. There was nothing that could roar or run, nothing that could tremble or cry in the air. ... It was night; ...

In this darkness the Creators waited ... They were there in this emptiness, hidden under green and blue feathers, alone and surrounded with light. They are the same as wisdom. They are the ones who can conceive and bring forth a child from nothingness. And the time had come. The Creators ... planned the growth of thickness, how things would crawl and jump, the birth of man. They planned the whole creation ... Then let the emptiness fill! They said. Let the water weave its way downward so the earth can show its face! Let the light break on the ridges, let the sky fill up with the yellow light of dawn! Let our glory be a man walking on a path through the trees! “Earth!” the Creators called.

After students have reread the text, lead them in a discussion of what the text reveals implicitly, focusing on the questions that guided their rereading.

3. **REREAD AND ANALYZE.** Have student read the text a third time, guiding their reading with analytical questions such as the following: *What is the author's attitude toward the subject? How does the author use vocabulary, syntax, and various literary devices to reveal his/her attitude? Why did the author choose to use certain words or sentence structures? How did these choices affect the meaning of the text? Do you think the literary devices the author used were effective? ...* and so forth. After they have reread the text, lead students to analyze the text on a deeper level, focusing on the questions that guided their rereading.
4. **REREAD AND INTERPRET.** Have student read the text a fourth time, guiding their reading with questions that require them to consider the text in relation to the body of cultural material in which it resides: *What references does the author make to the larger cultural context (e.g., myths, Biblical stories, literary works, and so forth)? Why did the author use those references? How does that choice affect the overall impact of the work? ...* and so forth. After students have finished rereading the text, lead them in a discussion of their interpretation of the text, focusing on the questions that guided their rereading.

Instructing students in the process of close reading will help them develop a much stronger grasp of the material they encounter in school (as well as the texts that will face them in “real life”). The critical importance of close reading skills is reflected in the emphasis the Common Core Standards accords this level of reading proficiency.



*If you're not already using Grammar Gallery, see for yourself how the 300 readings in the program can help your students develop and refine their **close reading** skills. Every reading is available online. You can print the readings, project them on a screen, or have students access them on a computer or an iPad. Visit [www.grammargallery.org](http://www.grammargallery.org) to learn more about the nation's premier grammar program. We offer free trials for educators!*