

## CHAPTER ONE

# Strategic Close Reading of Informational Sources

I remember a lesson with a group of intermediate grade students reading an article that describes the similarities and differences between life on Earth and life on the International Space Station. As the students began to read, they seemed excited about what they might learn. When I leaned in to confer with individuals, though, I noticed they were only comprehending the content at a superficial level. One student told me she had learned that astronauts use “liquid salt and pepper” on their food (May, 2015). When I asked her to tell me more about that, she was not able to tell me why they used *liquid* salt—an important point the author addresses. Another student told me he learned that toilets on the space station are different. When I asked him to tell me more, he was not able to explain how they are different—another important point the author includes. These conversations revealed to me that while the students were making some sense of simple details in the source, they were not grappling with the more difficult information. This gap in understanding would hinder their ability to think about the bigger ideas in the article.

What do we do when we notice this lack of critical thinking? Teaching for strategic close reading may be helpful. Strategic close reading involves reading a source or part of a source multiple times to develop a deeper understanding of the content. The goal of the first read is to gain a basic understanding of the source. Then strategic close reading occurs when a reader carefully analyzes the entire source or a part of it as she reads the source again (Brummett, 2010). The reader looks closely at the pieces (e.g., words, phrases, an image), thinking about the value of these pieces and how they relate or connect to one another. As the reader engages in this process, she may employ the use of multiple strategies, or deliberate actions, that help her make sense of the source. Examples of these strategies include asking specific types of questions or tapping background

knowledge about how sources are structured. As a result, the reader can begin to think critically about different aspects of the source like the author’s central ideas, writing craft, or point of view.

Strategic close reading is driven by a clear purpose. The purpose, or goal, is a reason, intention, or motivation for engaging in this experience (Almasi & Fullerton, 2012). The purpose acts as a guide. There are a wide variety of purposes a reader might have. The purpose, stated as a question, might simply be “What is important to learn from this source?” or “What is the author’s message?” The purpose might be related to the craft of writing like “How does the author’s word choice reveal his or her point of view?” The purpose may be related to the content in the source like “How did the social activists exhibit courage during this period?” or “How are chemical and physical reactions a part of our everyday lives?” In school settings some purposes for close reading may be set by the students and some may be set by the teacher.

In today’s world, there are so many informational sources that our students need to learn to engage with mindfully. Strategic close reading can be done with any type of source, including traditional texts that consist primarily of written words as well as videos, audio clips, and infographics. For the purposes of this book, then, the term *strategic close reading* means *strategic close reading–viewing–listening*.

Before we get into how to teach students strategic close reading, let’s take a moment to think about what strategic close reading looks like with three types of sources: an excerpt from a traditional text, a short video, and an infographic. In this case, our purpose for analysis will be to identify some of the main ideas in each source. I’ve provided the text or a link for each. I encourage you to give yourself a moment to engage in reading or watching these sources multiple times. As you do, begin to notice what you do—the strategies you use, as a proficient reader–viewer–listener—to make sense of these sources and to identify main ideas in each.

## WHAT DOES STRATEGIC CLOSE READING OF A TRADITIONAL TEXT LOOK LIKE?



As you read the following excerpt from the children’s book *Frogs* (Bishop, 2008), begin to consider this question: What is one of the author’s main ideas?

Some frogs seek out their food. A toad hops around after dark, snapping up moths, beetles, and crickets. It may eat more than 5,000 insects during a single summer. Other frogs ambush their prey. A horned frog hides among leaves on the rain forest floor in South America. It stays absolutely still, day after day. When an animal comes by, the frog watches attentively, waiting until it moves closer. Then it seizes the prey with a loud snap of its huge mouth. The horned frog is not a fussy eater. It gulps down cockroaches, lizards, mice, and even other horned frogs. (p. 17)

After a first read, you might simply say, “This paragraph is about how frogs like the toad and horned frog seek out their food.” But let’s consider how our understanding of content in this paragraph might deepen if we read this excerpt again, pausing at the end

of each sentence or so to consider what the author is trying to say? We might begin to realize that the author has used a variety of details to create a much richer picture.

Let's closely review the paragraph, sentence by sentence. The first sentence introduces the primary topic—how “frogs seek out their food.” The second and third sentences describe how the toad finds its food—“hops around”—and even state how many insects it can eat in just one summer—“5,000.” The fourth sentence begins with “Other frogs,” which signals to the reader that a contrast is about to be made. The fifth sentence introduces the “horned frog” and proceeds into a four-sentence descriptive sequence of the horned frog's ambush of its prey. This is followed by a sentence that describes the horned frog as “not a fussy eater.” In the last sentence, the author gives examples of what it eats. This list of examples is different from the foods for the toad listed earlier, so it can be inferred that the toad and frog eat different things. Students engaging in the act of close reading to identify the author's main idea might say:

The author is describing how both the toad and the horned frog seek out their food. But he doesn't just give information about one and then the other. He describes these creatures' habits in such a way that I noticed the contrast between the two. They are very different in how they seek their food and in what they eat. I think this idea ties back to the theme in the book that frogs are highly diverse creatures.

By considering the weight of meaning of particular phrases or sentences in a section of text and by tapping prior knowledge about frogs and animals, we begin to see how important details fit together to support the author's central idea or message in a particular section of text. This kind of understanding can help our students analyze and then critique the author's ideas at the whole text level as well.

## WHAT DOES STRATEGIC CLOSE VIEWING–LISTENING TO A VIDEO LOOK LIKE?



Next, let's consider a National Science Foundation (NSF) video titled *Food and Fear* (2016) about the pygmy rabbit, a species that lives in the high desert sagebrush steppe of eastern Idaho. If possible, take a few moments to watch this 3-minute video.\*



<https://bit.ly/2Enm3J8>

The first time you watch this video, you will probably notice that in the first minute the narrator clearly states a main idea—scientists are trying to understand this habitat by

\* Links to this and all other QR codes in this book can be accessed at the companion website (see the box at the end of the table of contents).

taking the perspective of an animal that has lived there for a long time. This statement provides a clue about what information will be important to pay attention to in the video. As you continue watching, you make sense of who the people are, where they are, and what they are trying to do. You finish the video with a basic understanding of the content in this video. Your summary might sound something like the following:

This video is about scientists who are studying the pygmy rabbit, which lives in the Lemhi Valley in eastern Idaho. What they learn from their research on the rabbit is helping them understand the ecosystem of this area. For example, they are beginning to understand how the sagebrush landscape provides nutrition for the rabbits as well as safe places to hide from predators.

This video has a lot more to offer, though. Try watching the video a second time. As you do, ask yourself these questions: “What does this video reveal about the work of scientists in the field?” and “How does the creator of this video develop this idea?” As you watch with this purpose in mind, you might notice how the creator of the video includes several examples of how scientists gather data systematically, using multiple methods:

- The scientists go out into the field and observe for rabbits.
- Then they catch rabbits to place tracking collars on them.
- Scientists also use drones to take photographs of the landscape.
- The data are used to create maps that document where the rabbits go and when.

Combined, these details reveal another main idea—that scientists are systematically investigating the life of the pygmy rabbit, using multiple methods. As a result of this systematic investigation, the scientists understand what the rabbit requires of the habitat it lives in. These details are conveyed through the images shown (see Figure 1.1) and the choice of words used in the narration.



**FIGURE 1.1.** Pygmy rabbit from the NSF video *Food and Fear*.

Close watching of this video a second time with a clear purpose can help us develop a deeper understanding of the ideas presented. Through careful analysis that involves identifying important details and thinking about how they are connected (i.e., synthesis), we begin to identify some of the central ideas in this video. Tapping prior knowledge (if available) about concepts like scientific investigation and the basic elements of a healthy habitat also helps in this endeavor.

## WHAT DOES STRATEGIC CLOSE READING OF AN INFOGRAPHIC LOOK LIKE?



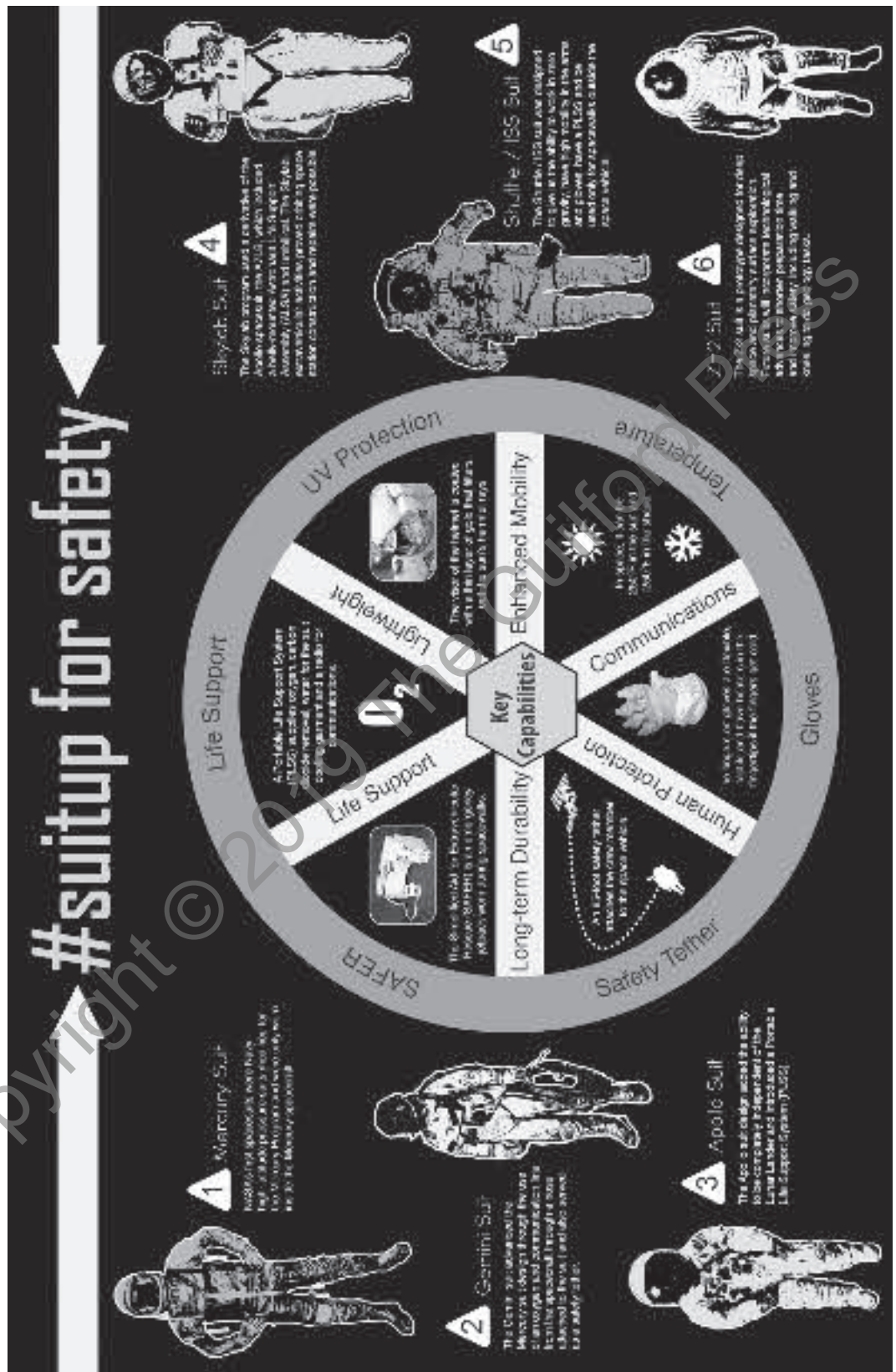
An infographic is a visual image used to represent information or an idea. An infographic may be just one graphic, like a diagram, chart, or map, or it may be a compilation of graphics. Figure 1.2 on the next page is an example of the latter type of infographic created by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and titled “#suitup for safety.” Take a moment to look at this infographic. Consider this your first “read.”

Now let’s do a close read. Our purpose for close reading is to answer the questions “How have space suits changed over time?” and “Why?” Around the edges of this infographic, you probably noticed that there are images of several space suits that NASA has created over time. Look carefully at the first three images of the space suits. What do you notice? You might notice details that show how the suits changed over the years to increase the capacity of what an astronaut could do. The first, the Mercury Suit, was less bulky but could only be worn inside the spacecraft. The second, the Gemini Suit, allowed the astronaut to leave the spacecraft while still connected by a line that provides oxygen. The third, the Apollo Suit, was the bulkiest of the three, but allowed the astronaut to be independent of the spacecraft and included a portable oxygen system. These details are conveyed in the images and captions that accompany them. You may have noticed this information when you first looked at the infographic, but what happened when you slowed down and considered the images and the words in just this part of the infographic? Hopefully, you furthered your initial understanding of the content and can walk away able to explain more easily the changes that occurred in these space suits.

Now take time to notice the wheel with spokes at the center of this infographic. Take a moment to “closely read” the details in this part of the infographic. What’s a main idea that emerges for you? The center of the wheel is labeled “key capabilities” and each spoke lists a capability like “life support,” “communications,” and “long-term durability.” Again, we can glean a main idea by considering each of these details—the wheel and spokes as well as the text or words—and how they are connected. If we think about how these details are related while tapping our background knowledge related to what it means to be safe, we may conclude that when NASA designs space suits, there are certain requirements for those suits or essential components that contribute to the safety and success of space exploration.



FIGURE 1.2. Infographic created by NASA and titled “#suitup for safety.” This infographic can be found at [www.nasa.gov/content/suitup-for-safety-infographic](http://www.nasa.gov/content/suitup-for-safety-infographic).



## HOW DO WE SUM UP STRATEGIC CLOSE READING–VIEWING–LISTENING?

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What did you have to do to engage in the mindful analysis of these three sources? Hopefully you noticed a process emerging.

- You got a sense of the source the first time you read or watched it.
- You slowed down and strategically engaged with the source a second time.
- You kept a clear purpose for this experience in mind (e.g., to glean a main idea or answer a question related to a main idea).
- You used various strategies, such as making connections between details and tapping prior knowledge about the world and how sources are structured.
- You monitored for learning—adjusting or adding new information to what you already knew about the world.

These elements of strategic close reading–viewing–listening are critical for our students to experience with our guidance and eventually on their own. What do we need to teach our students in order to help them reach this level of proficiency?

### **Read Closely, Out of Habit, to Gain a Deeper Understanding**

The first experience with a source—reading, viewing, and/or listening—is generally not enough to foster deeper understanding. While actively monitoring for meaning making, students must get in the habit of looking and then looking again; reading a chunk of text and then reading it again; listening to a dozen seconds of an audio clip and then listening again; viewing an infographic, then viewing it again, section by section.

### **Keep a Clear Purpose in Mind**

Our students need to recognize that reading is driven by the reader’s purpose or goal. The same applies to viewing or listening to a source. In the descriptions I wrote for close reading–viewing–listening, the purpose of identifying an author’s main idea or the question I posed drove the analysis of these sources. With a different purpose, the reader–viewer–listener might arrive at a different answer. For example, if the student read the text about frogs with the question “How does the author compare and contrast the frog and toad?” in mind, he might arrive at a different answer.

### **Use a Repertoire of Skills and Strategies to Make Meaning**

To make progress toward our purpose or goal for reading–viewing–listening, our students have to use skills and strategies at the point of need. Skills are “automatic actions that result in decoding and comprehension with speed, efficiency, and fluency and usually occur without awareness of the components or control involved” (Afflerbach, Pearson, &

Paris, 2008, p. 368). Strategies are “deliberate actions” a reader–viewer–listener takes to achieve a goal or purpose (Almasi & Fullerton, 2012, p. 1). As they think about their purpose for reading, our students may make sense of parts of sources effortlessly because, at some level, they are skilled readers–viewers–listeners. With more complex parts of sources, though, they may need to be more intentional in what they do to construct understanding. They may have to be strategic, employing the use of multiples strategies that will move them closer to achieving their goal for reading–viewing–listening. These strategies include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Maintaining clarity about the purposes or goals for reading–viewing–listening
- Tapping schemas related to content-area topics or issues (e.g., habitats, cells, civil rights)
- Tapping schemas related to how sources work (e.g., structure, purpose of text features, types of context clues, types of details authors use)
- Monitoring for when progress is or is not being made toward the goal for reading–viewing–listening
- Determining what is important by identifying key details
- Thinking about how key details are connected to reveal bigger ideas in the source (synthesis)

Our students may also have to use supporting strategies like the following:

- Jotting codes to mark their thinking
- Referring to anchor charts or bookmarks to help them remember how sources work
- Using analogies to help them conceptualize what they have to do as readers–viewers–listeners
- Underlining key words
- Annotating their thinking in the margins
- Taking notes that will trigger recall of important information

Our students need to be aware of these strategies and how proficient readers use strategies flexibly in a coordinated way that leads to understanding.

### **Construct Knowledge about the World**

While our students are learning how to make sense of complex sources, they are also learning about the world around them. As we teach for strategic close reading, we need to remind students that this is *why* we are engaging in this process. We need to constantly ask the students, “What did you just learn about the world because you slowed down to closely read this source?” This can be a transformative experience for students as they



realize that engaging actively in mindful reading of a source results in the construction of new knowledge. For some students, strategic close reading may simply help them state the facts they learned about a topic. For other students, strategic close reading may help them talk knowledgeably about their synthesis of details in a source (or multiple sources they have read or viewed closely) in order to formulate hypotheses about a particular concept based on what they learned through close reading.

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

Our ultimate goal is for students to become self-regulated learners who, as the need arises, engage in strategic close reading, viewing, and listening to sources and, as a result, construct meaning. Students who engage in this deliberate and mindful analysis of sources are more likely to recall details from the source and to make connections between details to arrive at bigger ideas (e.g., the author's purpose, point of view, main idea) (Paris & Winograd, 1990). Knowing that they are capable of doing this can increase motivation and a sense of personal agency as they tackle making meaning from complex sources on their own (Johnston, 2004).

Remember the students I described at the beginning of this chapter who read the article about life on the International Space Station? Over the course of several lessons, I had the honor of teaching them how to strategically read parts of this source a second and third time and respond orally and in writing. I taught them how texts like this work and how authors frequently use particular types of details to share information. Through strategic close reading, they began to recognize details that explained how and why and ask questions that helped them determine what was important. As a result, they were able to talk more fluently about what they had learned and why what they had learned was important to understanding the world. As a result, I noticed a difference when they came to me for later lessons. Their body language and comments like "Let's do this!" revealed a sense of "I know how to tackle complex sources!"