

FOR-PD's Reading Strategy of the Month



(Developed by Smith, L. & Zygouris-Coe, V., 2006)

Rationale:

"What really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it."

~J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*

This wish is probably true of many of us as we often see the author of a good read as personal companion that has led us on a great journey. It would be fabulous to meet and discuss the book in detail and ask those particular questions we often have about what the author was thinking as he or she wrote their book. And, along with the clever conversations we could have it would be very convenient to know the author when we get confused, when we are wondering what the author is actually trying to say. Perhaps the vocabulary the author used is getting in the way of understanding the text. Or, maybe the examples provided are fuzzy and unclear. There could be a reader breakdown where we think all the answers are within the text and do not take on the responsibility to create our own thoughts and reactions as we read. Whichever it is, wouldn't it just be easier to question our friend the author than try to figure it out ourselves?

Perhaps asking the author directly would be easier, but then we would not be constructing our own meaning of the given text. How would our ideas and thoughts be used to help construct meaning if the author simply told us what to think? Reading is more than just extracting information, it is building understanding by determining what the information means (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1997). It is a process where we must actively build meaning from the text as we read. Of course, there is a way to question the author, without actually having to meet or talk with them, which will offer us a way to experience the construction of understanding as it is happening.

The Questioning the Author (QtA) strategy is based on the constructivist view of learning in which "learners need to actively use information, rather than simply collect pieces of information" (Beck, et al., 1997, p. 8). QtA is geared to help students "consider meaning, to develop and grapple with ideas, and to try construct meaning" (Beck, et al., 1997, p. 6). This during-reading strategy allows teachers to ask specific questions of students that will help them create meaning and reflect on the text while they read. Through the use of classroom discussion, teachers will assist students in going beyond just sharing their opinions and ideas about a text they have read. Teachers will engage students with queries that ask students to consider the meaning of the text and not just retrieve information (Beck, et al., 1997). QtA is especially well suited for students who believe that all answers to all types of questions are located directly in the text (literalists) and for those students who are not able to elaborate on responses due to a fear of failure (minimalists) (Applegate, Benson, & Applegate, 2006).

The creation of QtA began when the authors performed analysis on social studies text and found that many had unclear goals, assumed more prior knowledge than students actually had, provided inadequate explanations and were generally ineffective in helping students build understanding. In order to help students understand the material, they revised the text. Through the process they found that had to understand the author's goal and consider what each idea was supposed to contribute to the goal. It occurred to them as they worked that the process they were working through to understand the text was exactly what students should be doing in order to construct meaning as they read (Beck, et al., 1997). In "Questioning the Author: A Yearlong Implementation to Engage Students with Text", the authors wrote that in order for students to feel able to construct meaning, the teacher would need to assist students with understanding that the text is written by someone who is imperfect, offer them specific, open-ended probes and request that they consider those probes while they read, and provide opportunities for collaboration (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1996). By helping students see themselves as "revisers" of the material they read, where they are highly aware of their own meaning-making processes, the students will be active and engaged in constructing meaning.

How to Use the Strategy:

The Question the Author strategy has three main components: planning the implementation, creating queries, and developing discussions. They are described below along with some tips you may want to consider before beginning the QtA strategy.

Before You Begin

Prepare Your Students

Let students know that they will be taking part in a different kind of reading. Tell them that you understand that it will take time to adjust but that you will be with them every step of the way to help guide them through the new process.

Depose the Author

Before beginning the strategy of QtA, teachers should take some time to depose the authority of the text their students will be reading. The author may have a strong background in the subject matter, but the content may still not be expressed in the clearest or easiest manner. Letting students know that the content presented is someone's ideas, a regular person that can sometimes makes mistakes, will provide students the opportunity to understand they have the right to question the author. Tell students directly that it is fine for them to question the author and that you know this may be new for them.

Thinking Aloud About the Text and Linking

Provide students with the opportunity to see parts of QtA modeled by first selecting a piece of text and then demonstrating the kinds of thoughts and considerations a reader should make when reading. Students should be given a copy of the text so that they can follow along. The teacher should read aloud, stop at difficult or interesting parts, and speak aloud about anything that is confusing. Saying aloud when the author's writing is confusing, when it is clear, and how you are trying to figure it out what is meant is an important part to this mini-lesson. An opportunity for students to share their own feelings about the text and add if it is confusing to them should be allowed.

Linking the Modeling to Discussion

After students have interacted with the text, a discussion should be initiated to help students note the features of the experience that just occurred. Some of the specific features include reading and stopping to consider what was read, noting any breakdown in the construction of meaning, thinking about what the author meant, why the author wrote that particular section, and why it is important to know should be addressed.

Recapping the Event

Upon completion of the think-aloud/discussion activity, take some time to explicitly tell your students that many of the techniques used today will be expected of them. Offer them support by going over some of the steps or doing another think-aloud/discussion in the following days.

Planning

Planning for Questioning the Author will be a bit different from the traditional planning done by most teachers. Often teachers use text manuals to identify the major themes, key ideas, and the kinds of questions they should be asking. Or teachers may look over the texts they are using but only for basic facts or as a place to find meaning that was already proven (Beck, et al., 1997).

Planning for QtA involves three considerations (Beck, et al., 1997):

- Identify the major understandings students should construct and anticipate potential problems in the text
- Segment the text to focus on information needed to build understanding
- Develop queries that promote understanding

It is important to note that while these considerations are not to be seen as specific steps, they are presented in this manner to help demonstrate how to help students construct meaning, and should be seen as a service to that overall goal.

Questioning the Author

Identifying Major Understandings and Potential Problems

Planning should begin with a critical reading of the text. The teacher should look for the major understandings that students will need to construct meaning. Making sure to include the author's intent or meaning is an important aspect of QTA. Often teachers see the text "as a finished product, a place to find meaning that already has been determined" (Beck, et al., 1997, p. 50). QTA provides students the opportunity to "converse" with the author and question what is being said. In order to accomplish this the teacher must put the author into the forefront of the lesson and go beyond just what is offered.

After considering the major points of the piece, teachers will also need to consider what possible problems may arise that will interrupt the students' construction. One way for the teacher to anticipate problems in the text is to monitor their own comprehension processes as they read the text. The teacher, by considering the parts they had to reread or think about, will be able to include them in the plans for that particular text. "Teachers who find themselves doing extra work when they read can be reasonably sure that their students also will encounter difficulties and may not be able to resolve the problems without support" (Beck, et al., 1997, p. 51).

Segment the Text to Focus on Information Needed to Build Understandings

Once the teacher has identified the major concepts they want their students to construct meaning about, and have considered any areas of difficulty, it is time to segment the text. Segmenting involves determining where to stop reading in order to initiate the query that will develop into a discussion. Teachers should not base this decision on when they reach the end of a paragraph or the end of a page. This decision should be based on the information found within the text and the key concepts that need to be reiterated, clarify, or explained.

Develop Queries that Promote the Building of those Understandings

Queries are a very important part of QTA process. They help link text with discussions and are what helps guide students to construct meaning. It is important to note the differences between queries and traditional questions. Questions are usually used to assess students' comprehension of text, evaluate individual student responses, prompt teacher-to-student interactions, and used before or after reading. Queries, on the other hand, assist students in grappling with text ideas to construct meaning, facilitate group discussions, and are used during initial reading (Beck, et al., 1997). Queries are geared toward helping teachers become facilitators of discussion rather than just having the ability to assess students' understanding, as with questions. The table below compares question-driven and query-driven discussions.

Question-Driven Discussions	Query-Driven Discussions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> one-word answers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> longer, more elaborate answers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in author's language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in student's language
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> text is used as a resource for retrieving information and the source for finding correct answers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> text is used as a reference for connecting ideas and constructing meaning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> teacher-to-student interactions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> student-to-student interactions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> little student engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> student engagement increased
<small>Based on Table 2 in Beck, I. L., McKeown, M. G., Hamilton, R. L., & Kucan, L. (1997). <i>Questioning the author: An approach for enhancing student engagement with text</i>. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.</small>	

There are three main types of queries: initiating, follow-up, and narrative. Within each of these main types of queries there are specific prompts that are used to help launch a discussion, focus students in a specific area of the content, or focus students on a particular characteristic of the text. It is important to remember that query prompts should be used during the reading of a text.

Initiating Queries

Three types of suggested Initiating Queries include:

- What is the author trying to say here?
- What is the author's message?
- What is the author talking about?

These types of prompts will help make text ideas public and prepare your students to construct meaning of the piece of text they are reading. Remember, this is to be done as you work through the text, not at the end of an assigned reading (Beck, et al., 1997).

Follow-Up Queries

Follow-up queries help focus the content and direction of the discussion. The goal is to help students look at "what the text *means* rather than what the text *says*" (Beck, et al., 1997, p. 37).

Some follow-up prompts that can do this are:

- What does the author mean here?
- Does the author explain this clearly?
- Does this make sense with what the author told us before?
- How does this connect to what the author told us here?
- Does the author tell us why?
- Why do you think the author tells us this now?

Narrative Queries

Narrative queries are used because narrative texts have different characteristics than expository text in terms of structure, authorship, and purpose. Queries may often deal with characters, theme, and plot. Some useful prompts for this type of query include:

- How do things look for this character now?
- Given what the author has already told you about this character, what do you think he's up to?
- How has the author let you know that something has changed?
- How has the author settled this for us?

Developing Discussions

Two primary components of a QTA discussion are the teacher's role and the students' contributions. The teacher's role encompasses participation in thinking and helping students develop ideas. They should spend little, if any time, managing ideas and explaining the text to the students. The students' role should be one of collaboration with other fellow-students as they encounter the text and construct ideas. (Beck, et al., 1997)

In order to create a more dynamic discussion that is more than just having students answer queries, as they might just answer questions, it should be the goal of the teacher to balance the student's perspective and their own perspective. The teacher needs to keep in mind that the text may be frustrating and confusing to the student while still remember the major understandings they want students to construct. "It is this coordination that changes a teacher's role from one who is simply manages and explains to one who participates in and facilitates the kind of thinking needed to build understanding of ideas" (Beck, et al., 1997, p. 78). In order to help teachers sustain the flexibility needed to making QTA a success, Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan offer what they consider "**discussion moves**", that is actions that teachers use to help them coordinate students ideas and make on-the-spot decisions (1997).

Discussion Moves

Marking

Marking is responding to a student's comment in such a way as to draw attention to certain concepts or ideas.

Marking Example

Student: Many things, like poverty, can cause crime. Not having enough money or not knowing how to get any money legally could cause some people to steal or hurt someone. People without money may feel like society's rules aren't working for them so why should they care.

Teacher: So if someone feels society's rules aren't working for them, then they may not follow society's rules.

Here the teacher is marking the student's last comment to emphasize the point that crime can be caused by poverty and how when some do not feel society is taking care of them, they shouldn't worry about the rules of society. Another way to acknowledge something important during marking is to do it explicitly.

Teacher: Good answer! People who feel that the society has let them down through poverty or unemployment are often less likely to obey the rules or laws of that society.

Turning Back

Turning back involves both turning responsibility of learning back to the student and turning student's attention back to the text in order to clarify thinking. In the first part of the conversation the teacher is trying to get student 1 to think deeper about what this author is saying. In the second part, the teacher is trying to get students to consult the text for accurate information.

Turning Back Example

(Students are reading a piece of text about managing waste and garbage.)

Teacher: What is the author trying to tell us by writing about the barge full of garbage and trash that keeps floating up and down the coast?

Student 1: He's telling us no one wants the trash.

Teacher: Is that a big deal—no one wanting or being able to dispose of the trash?

Student 1: Yes, we've got too much trash. I see bags and bags of it every Tuesday by the curbs in my neighborhood.

Student 2: I don't understand why we have all this trash around. Almost everything is recyclable nowadays. Everyone I knows recycles their cans and paper.

Teacher: As Americans, do we recycle that much of our waste? What does the author tell us is the amount of waste we recycle?

Student 2: Oh, he does say it's only 27%. That isn't that much. It just feels like more. I see all those recycling bins around.

Revoicing

Revoicing means to help students express what they are trying to say by interpreting it rephrasing it in order to help them become part of the conversation.

Revoicing Example

Student: James Madison didn't get enough credit. He was important and put a lot of his ideas into the constitution. He liked the idea of government.

Teacher: It seems you are saying that James Madison played an important role on the formation of our government and that many ideas like having a strong government were championed by him.

Modeling

Modeling helps students to learn what is expected of them in a specific environment. The teacher offers an example of sorts on how a response should be given and how thoughtful thinking sounds. Modeling can be used during QtA when many students are confused or not able to elaborate on the queries provided.

Modeling Example

Teacher: What do you think the author is trying to tell us?

Student 1: He provides us a quote by Franklin Roosevelt about government. I think he's trying to tell us this lesson is going to be about government.

Teacher: Why did the author use this quote?

Student 1: He might like using quotes. It's easier to write with quotes so you don't have to write the ideas yourself.

Student 2: I think the quote is about government and that it matches what he's going to write about.

Teacher: Those are interesting thoughts. When I read this quote I thought about how Roosevelt compares the three branches of government to three horses. I like that the author included this quote because it is easier for me to picture three horses than the judicial, legislative, and executive branches of government. Comparing the actions of the horses to actions of the government in the line "so that their field might be plowed" helps me understand that these branches are vital to the workings of our federal government.

Annotating

Annotating involves the teacher providing information to fill in any gaps in information, reasoning, and assumptions due to the author not providing enough information. Annotating is good to use when students do not have enough background knowledge to understand the author's message.

Annotating Example

<p>Teacher: While it is true that Jefferson thought doubling the size of the United States a good thing, the author didn't tell us that Jefferson was not fond of the idea of having to purchase the Louisiana Territory from France. Having to purchase it would give the idea that France had a right to be in Louisiana.</p>
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Recapping

Recapping is a good discussion move to use when the teacher believes students have been able to construct the key concepts and meaning and are able to continue with the text. Recapping involves the teacher summarizing major ideas that students have constructed.

Recapping Example

<p>Teacher: Yes, good thoughts here from everyone. You figured out that in a market economy, individuals make major economic decisions and their thoughts on what should be produced, how much should be produced, and how it will be produced.</p>
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Using these kinds of discussion moves will benefit the flow of the discussion and help students construct meaning as they read the text; this is the primary goal of QtA strategy.

*Examples created with use of Davis, J.E. and Fernlund, P.M. (2001). *Civics: Participating in government*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall.

Assessment:

Teachers can assess the success of using Questioning the Author by reviewing how students constructed meaning. Evaluating the process the students go through and judging the end result, along with reflectively looking back at the discussion itself and considering their role will help teachers gain insight. Assessing students use of the QtA strategy, along with considering the overall outcome of the activity, will aid the teacher in preparing for future QtA activities.

A QtA Teacher Self-Evaluation is offered here as a PDF document.

QtA Teacher Self-Evaluation		
 <p>QUESTIONING THE AUTHOR TEACHER SELF-EVALUATION</p>		
Statement		Check <input type="checkbox"/>
<p>Initial Instruction/Re-lesson</p> <p>I prepared the students for this new activity and shared with them that I know they will read, practice and perform.</p> <p>I prepared the author and helped my students understand that authors are just people that can be unclear and mistaken, at times.</p>		
<p>I modeled my own thoughts (think aloud) as I read a piece of text to show them how missing what reading is an important step by becoming a thoughtful reader.</p> <p>I provided students with opportunities to consider their own thoughts on the text.</p> <p>I discussed the text and how the modeling I did would be expected of my students.</p>		
<p>Planning and Implementing Questioning the Author</p> <p>I identified the major understandings of the materials I wanted to cover.</p> <p>I organized the text to help me prepare where I wanted to initiate queries.</p> <p>I developed queries appropriate for the text.</p> <p>I provided positive discussion moves for use of myself using the self-evaluation for QtA.</p>		
Total		

Resources:**Question the Author**

<http://wilearns.state.wi.us/apps/default.asp?cid=124>

A high school teacher gives step-by-step instructions for using the Questioning the Author strategy.

Think-Alouds

<http://www.itrc.ucf.edu/strategies/stratthinkaloud.html>

Want to learn more about how to assist students with think-alouds? This resource will provide you with a rationale, specific steps to follow, and an assessment piece to use.

Questioning The Author

http://score.rims.k12.ca.us/score_lessons/content_area_literacy/pages/questioning_the_author.html

This site offer specific features, planning tips, advantages, and questions to use during the Questioning the Author strategy.

Questioning the Author

<http://www.fcrr.org/FCRRReports/PDF/QuestioningAuthorFinal.pdf#search=%22questioning%20the%20author%22>

The Florida Center for Reading Research provides a information on how the book, *Questioning the Author* is aligned with current reading research and the strengths and weaknesses of this strategy.

Questioning the Author Process

<http://www.bcpl.net/~dcurtis/psd/handouts/s1-11/proc.html>

Want to learn more about the process of the Questioning the Author strategy? Then this site will be useful to you. Learn the basic steps and exactly what a query is in relationship to this great strategy.

Question the Author: Textbooks Can Sometimes Skew Information

<http://www.weac.org/News/1997-98/APRIL98/read.htm>

Doug Buehl offers this detailed, step-by-step guide on how to use the Questioning the Author strategy when questioning the author of text books used in the classroom.

Critical Analysis: Questioning the Author/Questioning the Book

http://www.esiponline.org/classroom/foundations/reading/critical_analysis.html

The authors of this site will provide you with how to use this strategy to help engage readers, make them more critical, and have the ability to evaluate the text and the author.

Questioning The Author: Teaching Children How to Monitor Comprehension WHILE Reading

<http://students.cup.edu/moc8739/>

Shannon Mocharko provides details on planning and implementing Question the Author along with describing her own experiences using the strategy.

References:

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Questioning the Author

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