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How to Peel a Prologue: Sensory Reading in Practice in Two 90-Minute Lessons

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Abstract:

This essay provides rich examples of sensory reading in practice. It provides strategies for peeling a prologue, a methodology that engages developmental readers through active reading and writing examples. The strategies can be built on and extended to larger pieces of work. The essay is also a good example of scaffolding and using graphic organizers in a developmental writing community college classroom.

Key Words:

sensory reading, close reading, scaffolding assignments, developmental writers

Introduction

When diving into a new text with my students, I like to begin at the very beginning, as they say. Students must look at all the opening clues of a text and begin a *sensory reading* to engage successfully in critical reading. From the first introduction to the title and any epigraph that precedes the story, students are urged to decode and examine the clues. This prompts them to question what the book is about from the very beginning and provides the first steps in constructing and mapping their knowledge. I find that texts with prologues – dense and tightly written explanatory excerpts that come before a story – are very effective to teach close reading. Prologues are often rich in details and engaging, making them accessible to readers of various skill levels, and frequently foreshadow or articulate the main idea or theme of a novel. Good prologues highlight for the reader what is deemed important at the onset of the novel, which evolves with the flowing narrative. There is nothing quite like peeling a prologue to place the reader at the center of perceiving and discovering the juicy details of a text.

Linda Elder and Richard Paul (2004) instruct against impressionistic reading, exactly the sort of preliminary sensory reading that begins my own sequence of activities, from

Pre-Reading to Self-Reflection. Because impressionistic reading can lead to the reader gathering a superficial or false reading of the text, the type of sensory reading I advocate for in the early pre-reading phases of decoding a text must be followed with how the pre-cursory activities are connected to larger contextualized themes, evident in the Interpreting portion of my methodology. Elder and Paul's (2004) analysis is very useful in framing reading activity lesson plans that teach readers to become actively aware that they are reading for a purpose and engaging in the creation of meaning. I share their goal of cultivating readers who are vigilant about the words and phrases on a page and who can actively distinguish between the author's purpose [..] questions, assumptions, concepts" and their own (Elder & Paul, 2004, pp. 36-37). This active and vigilant close reader can decipher both planes of the text and oscillates between "cognitive and metacognitive" – the thinking presented in the text and the particular way the reader receives and processes it – an interrelated and integrated process that swings like a pendulum as the reader engages the text presented (Elder & Paul, 2004, pp. 36-37). The active reading strategies Elder and Paul (2004) outline in their column on critical reading are imperative for a developing reader to categorize the various actions and themes presented in a text they encounter for the first time in a developmental reading and writing class. Importantly, I see my use of sensory reading of prologues as a bridge to the developmental arc in the type of reading skills on which Elder and Paul (2004) focus for more advanced readers – from sensory reading to making deeper, more contextualized meaning of the text.

Early pre-reading questions can help developing readers gather cues to ultimately form deeper meaning from the text. From the first sighting of the title, epigraph, and prologue, a reading can be framed by the following pre-reading and cursory reading prompts:

- What do you see as you read?
- Are there landscapes, places, colors, or actions occurring?
- What sounds do you hear?
- What types of memories do the smells, taste, and physical sensations described trigger?
- What feelings or emotions are created by the words and phrases used by the author?
- What can you learn about the characters from their descriptions and speech?

Answering these questions according to their sensory perceptions allows students to practice reading each detail closely to gain a deeper understanding of the themes being presented by the author and eventually, of the overall narrative. Daphne Loads (2013) defines close reading as "paying attention to a short text, word by word, in order to build up layers of meaning. The reader may draw upon commonly shared understandings, disciplinary definitions, and his or her own idiosyncratic associations" (p. 950). Teaching these reading skills as separate processes gives students a chance to gradually peel away at the layers of a story and to find their place at the center of a new reading as they gain confidence in their close reading abilities. For Loads (2013), who teaches practitioners *collaborative* close reading, a shared reading experience allows for richer engagement with the text because of the "opportunities for questioning and response" (p. 950). Through having practitioners read word-for-word to garner meaning regardless

of fully understanding context and content, Loads (2013) suggests a method for how readers should encounter the unknown in the text while accepting, even embracing that a text may shift, build, or unravel depending on the author's intention (p. 951). The techniques outlined below offer just that – a way for developing writers to question and respond both individually and collaboratively.

Arriving at the center of a text involves decoding each detail through the use of sensory perception – seeing, smelling, tasting, feeling, and hearing. At a very primal level, we encounter the world through our senses; reading a text, even one with some unrecognizable words or phrases, forces a reader to engage their senses to create meaning. This article will showcase two separate 90-minute lessons on close reading that use the prologues to Esmeralda Santiago's (1993) *When I was Puerto Rican* and Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets* to illustrate how focused reading activities can be used to create a more comprehensive frame for analysis. These lessons utilize graphic organizers and are geared for students in a developmental Reading and Writing course who have not yet taken College English. Each assignment outlined below moves from a solitary reading exercise to a collaborative reading activity back to individual reflection: Pre-Reading, Group Discussion, Listening and Annotating, Interpreting, Share and Pair, and Individual Reflection.

Begin at the Beginning

Esmeralda Santiago's prologue to *When I Was Puerto Rican* offers a rich entry into a story of borders, belonging, and coming of age in the face of challenges with identity and gender. Santiago's autobiographical novel captures her family's journey from Puerto Rico to New York with poignant stories of the difficulties in adjusting to life in New York due to racism, language barriers, and culture clash. The prologue begins with the epigraph "Barco que no anda, no llega a Puerto" or "A ship that doesn't sail, never reaches port" (Santiago, 1993, p.3). As a pre-reading activity, students are asked to read the title of the text, scan the first page, take note of any of the text's physical characteristics using sensory reading techniques, and to respond to the following questions on an activity sheet:

Pre-Reading Questions and Discussion

1. Look at the first page of the excerpt, but do not read the page. How is the excerpt organized and presented? What do you notice about the page?
2. What expectations do you have about the story based on the title? What expectations do you have based on the title of the excerpt? Can you think of one example of a book/poem/song whose title captured the meaning of what the author/poet/songwriter wanted to present?
3. What do you notice about the epigraph? What clues does it give you about the story?
4. What is a prologue? Why do writers include prologues?
5. Are there images that stood out based on what you were seeing, hearing, tasting, feeling, and smelling? Were any of these images relatable? If yes, how?

These initial pre-reading questions help to situate students as they begin to observe concrete physical traits of the text and they also provide an opportunity for readers to express whether anything resonates or connects with their own experiences based on the preliminary reading. Paul and Elder (2003) argue that “skilled readers do not read blindly; they read purposely” (p. 36), differentiating based on purpose and context. To do so effectively, readers accumulate a so-called toolkit, including a reader’s awareness of her own purpose in reading, the author’s purpose in writing, the interconnectedness of the ideas being presented from paragraph to paragraph, and the underlying system of ideas being presented (Paul and Elder, 2004, p. 36). For Loads (2013), this framework is all the more beneficial when these abilities are trained through shared reading experiences. My assignment sequence aims to maximize this collaborative advantage. Before students begin to read, the pre-reading activities are discussed as a group. Then, after students are finished with the questions, they exchange their interpretations in a “pair and share.” This provides examples of how students use context clues to make inferences. In the act of reading students are also learning about how other students read – a transformative activity when working with developmental readers.

Santiago begins her text with the idea that if a ship stays anchored, it does not undertake the life journey for which this is an analogy. Only by sailing can a ship arrive at port. A reader is pushed to ask what is its purpose if it stays anchored, still, unchanged. Likewise, what is the purpose of a person, a body, a spirit, or a soul that is not in movement or evolving? Santiago’s ship is a metaphor for a human being, with the cargo of identity, memories, thoughts, emotions, and more. Unpacking the epigraph can elicit a philosophical reading of the text ahead; the listening and annotation activities provide concrete ways for students to decipher what the text is stating, which will correlate or divert from their initial readings of the prologue.

Listening and Annotating

These pre-reading activities are followed by a listening and annotating activity that asks students to identify problem words and phrases while a volunteer reads aloud from the prologue. By offering struggling readers a communal environment where words and phrases are carefully analyzed for both literal and contextual meaning, students are provided a safe space to practice close reading skills. They are given the following prompt: “As you listen to the Prologue being read out loud, underline words that you think are important and circle words you are not sure you understand.” In *When I was Puerto Rican*, students frequently select words such as ‘castor oil,’ ‘laden,’ ‘crevices,’ ‘grimace,’ and ‘nostalgia’ as needing additional clarification. Once the words and phrases have been marked, students use their dictionary to look up the words they do not understand as well as create a list of words that are new vocabulary or that they find difficult from the short reading.

Interpreting and Reflecting

After pre-reading, listening, and annotating, students then proceed to interpretation and self-reflection. Graphic organizers help students to group ideas and synthesize large amounts of information quickly and effectively. Below is a shortened example of a graphic organizer used to synthesize images in the Santiago’s Prologue during the

interpretation portion of the lesson. Students are given the following instruction for completing the organizer:

Santiago uses juxtapositions to describe mixed emotions. The adjectives in the story help the reader understand the conflict she is experiencing. List the adjectives and phrases Santiago uses to describe guavas in the excerpt.

Guava in New York	Guava in Puerto Rico

Figure 1. Guava in New York v. guava in Puerto Rico. This figure illustrates the graphic organizer used to identify juxtaposition in the Prologue to *When I Was Puerto Rican*.

These images provide the basis for inferences and examples later used to answer the questions below:

1. Parts of the excerpt focus on looking back. How would you describe the emotions Santiago associates with looking back?
2. Parts of the excerpt show that the narrator is also looking forward. List one sentence or phrase here that shows evidence of looking forward.
3. What emotions do you feel as you think about the excerpt? What emotions seem most important to the narrator?
4. The example of migration is caught between the images of natural versus commercial. How should readers understand this dichotomy?

Students answer these questions on a worksheet, then share their answers in a large group discussion. By hearing the responses of their classmates, students learn that others have similar ideas to theirs, while also acknowledging that individuals gather different understandings from the same words, phrases, and clues. In order to successfully complete these activities, students will use what Paul and Elder (2004) term “structural reading” (p. 36) to identify key ideas in the context of a paragraph and to finding relationships between these core ideas. “Finding key sentences,” even in an excerpt as brief as a prologue, “means finding the sentences that are the driving force within a book” (Paul & Elder, 2004, p. 36). The examples provided illustrate how interpretive questions and graphic organizers can be used to help students progress in steps from sentence-to-sentence meaning to sentence-to-paragraph meaning to structural readings of an entire text. This scaffolded development of structural reading adds to the readers’ growing awareness that their concepts, assumptions, and experiences guide their interpretations of texts. Both are essential to attaining close reading skills and successfully grasping a given text.

At the end of the multiple reading steps in the Santiago exercise, students are guided to write quietly for 5 minutes as the final stage of reflection, during which they consider the metacognitive aspects of the previous activities. This closing reflection can be teacher-driven in the form of a reader response to the process of peeling the prologue, or a question that focuses on the theme of the reading excerpt. For instance,

in response to the prologue to *When I Was Puerto Rican*, students are prompted to “think of a moment of transition in your life that parallels Santiago’s feelings. What emotions did you experience in that moment? What emotions do you experience thinking back about that moment?” This type of cumulative activity gives students the opportunity to process all of the activities and learning objectives of the lesson.

Beyond the Beginning – Synthesis and Connections Beyond the Text

The cumulative activities addressed above can be extended to synthesis and making connections to additional types of narrative or texts. Beginning with a prologue and extending that reading out to a song or poem or another type of text gives students another way to anchor their reading experience. Piri Thomas’ (1997) prologue to *Down These Mean Streets* captures a skinny, angry, young, tanned boy screaming in the night on the rooftop of his home in Harlem; it is a good example of a prologue that extends itself to multiple entry points. *Down These Mean Streets* is a story of an Afro-Latino boy growing up in Spanish Harlem. This harsh memoir is a story of survival and loss, race and identity, and freedom and imprisonment. The striking use of punctuation marks, capitalization, and diction is easily noticed without a close reading. Unlike Santiago’s text which had a variety of unfamiliar words, Thomas’ prologue uses familiar words and phrases to create rich imagery. The most noticeable aspect of the prologue is its use of punctuation marks. The sequence of Pre-Reading and Discussion, Listening and Annotating, Interpretation and Reflection activities is maintained in order to complete the close reading of the text.

Pre-Reading Questions and Discussion

1. What expectations do you have about the story based on the title?
2. Look at the first page of the excerpt but do not read the page. Do any punctuation marks stand out on the page?
3. What do you notice about the excerpt as you skim the lines?
4. Are there images that stood out based on what you were seeing, hearing, tasting, feeling, and smelling? Were any of these images relatable? If yes, how?

Listening and Annotating

Student volunteers take turns reading the prologue while standing on top of a chair in class. Students are given the following instructions:

As you listen to the Prologue being read out loud, underline words that you think are important and circle words you are not sure you understand. Put a star next to places you think are important. Using context clues, define the words and terms below and any others you do not recognize.

Students often highlight ‘drabness’ and ‘stark,’ as well as words conjoined to create descriptions specific to the author’s style, such as ‘bulb-lit’ and ‘garbage-lepered.’

Interpretation and Reflection

After listening to and reading the lyrical prologue, students are asked to consider the following questions:

1. Why does the Prologue begin with “YEE-AH!!” and why is the audience identified as “anybody”? Who is Piri speaking to?
2. The prologue focuses on putting into words on paper what would otherwise be an uncaptured oral (spoken) moment. How do you know that the Prologue is trying to represent speech?
3. Piri focuses on speaking himself into the world when he states “here I am”. Why does he feel the need to speak (or yell) his identity and why do you think this is occurring at night?
4. What is the role of night or “darkness” in the Prologue? Is it positive? Negative? Or both?
5. Why does Piri include Spanish words? What are the effects of conjoined words, “misspelled words,” curse words, and colloquial phrases? Identify a few examples and discuss.
6. What is Piri trying to reclaim in the Prologue? Is he part of the world he describes? Standing outside of the world? Standing on top of the world? Is his relational position to the world based on the prologue accurate?
7. Why is the Christmas tree dirty? What is the role of the Christmas tree?
8. What emotions do you feel as you think about the prologue? What emotions seem most important to the narrator?
9. We focused a lot on speaking. What is the role of hearing in the prologue? Why does Piri want us to listen?

These questions allow students to use context clues to construct greater meaning for this very short narrative. Piri’s voice speaks directly to students and students respond directly to him, which makes this selection especially useful. One pervading question about this piece is who “owns” this narrative and how it reflects student experiences in the 21st century, if at all. Reading this narrative in an urban setting may garner different responses from classrooms that are less urban or multicultural. In addition, urban students may ask whether they should take ownership of this selection even if it is far removed from their own lived experiences.

Comparing Texts Using a Venn Diagram

Peeling the prologue to *Down These Mean Streets* has the same order as the Santiago lesson; however, because Thomas does not have the innate juxtaposition of the guava in Puerto Rico as opposed to the U.S. Mainland, the instructor can create a juxtaposition by comparing Piri’s voice to another protagonist. The lesson sequence for *When I Was Puerto Rican* can be modified to include a second piece for students to analyze for connections to themes from another text. Text here could mean a poem, theoretical essay, video clip, music video, film, song, and other formats.

When I listen to Piri Thomas’ message read out aloud, I hear echoes of Grandmaster Flash and Furious Five’s “The Message” – an example of early hip hop that denounces social injustice and represents the frustration of artists. The hook affirms some of Piri’s sentiments: “Don’t push me ‘cause I’m close to the edge/ I’m trying not to

lose my head/ It's like a jungle sometimes/ It makes me wonder how I keep from going under" (Fletcher, 1982). As students listen to the musical selection, they are provided with a Venn diagram graphic organizer to write down and organize the lyrics. The graphic organizer contains the following instructions:

There are some similarities between Thomas's Prologue and Grand Master Flash's "The Message." Use the Venn diagram to identify similarities and differences. Where do ideas and themes overlap?

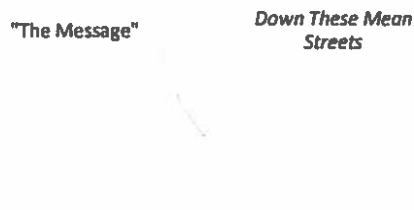


Figure 2. The message v. Piri on the roof. This figure illustrates the Venn diagram used to juxtapose the song "The Message" to the Prologue to Down These Mean Streets.

The Venn diagram allows students to visually represent their ideas and the ideas they plot into each section provides examples of differences and interrelated ideas. These examples then provide good material to be used in an essay or a critical reflection response paper. The use of the Venn diagram as a graphic organizer also allows students to build on shared ideas and concepts in a manner that is visually appealing and coherent.

Like Piri Thomas, Grandmaster Flash is on the edge, and both are voicing their protest and discontent; the incorporation of a second text allows students to extend their reading of the prologue. After reading a text that challenges socioeconomic parameters and authority, it is important to engage students in self-reflection. Reflection allows students to develop more and deeper connections with texts as they develop their own metacognitive awareness of the learning process they are engaged in. This type of reflection also allows students who have not spoken up in class to provide additional thoughts and feedback to the lesson. In the case of the example below, rather than asking about which themes resonate with the students, I inquire about who is left out of this narrative and whether one should take ownership of the narrative. In other words, what is problematic about presenting two pieces that are at the margins? The closing reflection prompt reads: "think about the types of urban culture that are represented in Thomas's Prologue and "The Message" and the types that are missing. In the space below or on an index card provided, write your answer to the following question: What is the impact of us as a class focusing in on this type of narrative?"

These questions and activities are only a starting point in providing developing readers with tools to approach a piece of text. The fourth and final step not illustrated in the explication of these activities would include activities on how students assess or evaluate a given reading. The sequence of Pre-Reading and Discussion, then Listening and Annotating, and finally, Interpreting and Self-Reflection can be adopted for longer

narratives and can be applied to various genres of texts. Analyzing large chunks of reading takes skill and precision and students benefit from receiving various ways of entering a reading, especially methods that make the reading experience collaborative and inclusive for students at every skill level. The process of reading can be broken up with multi-layered questions and steps that provides multiple benefits to students (a few of the benefits are highlighted below; this list is not exhaustive):

Pre-reading	Utilizes students' strengths by showcasing what they know from the precursory reading; values past experiences; helps to provide preliminary context; allows students to focus on smaller details rather than the overwhelming experience of reading and understanding a large piece of text with unfamiliar words and phrases.
Discussion	Provides a collaborative and shared experience of the text; allows students to see that their peers have similar and different ideas about a shared reading; illustrates that peers struggle with aspects of the text and that having questions is part of the learning process.
Listening and Annotating	Students hear the words on the page which helps with pronunciation; focused reading exercise allows students to highlight unfamiliar words as well as phrases and terms that stood out to them; creates a participatory exercise for what would normally be an isolated reading activity.
Interpreting	Provides opportunities for contextualized meaning making based on reading strategies such as using inferences and context clues; helps students to use evidence from the text to support claims; provides a framework that helps to illuminate important themes; brings together the smaller earlier steps which allows students to conceptualize the arc of the presented text.
Reflection	Captures the learning process of students and instructor; allows students to synthesize the text and map connections onto their own experiences; provides insight into questions about the text not addressed in class.

Graphic organizers are very helpful to students, and although they are not used as widely in college classrooms as in K-12, such tools are important for mappings developing ideas and diagramming relationship between concepts. Furthermore, closing a reading activity or lesson with a self-reflection highlights the students' own learning process. They are motivated to ask: Why is this material important? How does it relate to my knowledge bank and life experiences? What am I learning as I learn? How do the processes aid or hinder the learning objectives? These final steps are as important as using inferences or dictionaries to create meaning. From the beginning to the end, this sequence strengthens student skills as close, critical readers.

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