

Teaching Through Close Reading: Historical and Informational Texts

An Online Professional Development Seminar

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C.

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1984-85

AMERICA *in* CLASS[®]

from the National Humanities Center

We will begin promptly on the hour.

The silence you hear is normal.

If you do not hear anything when the images change, e-mail Caryn Koplik
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for assistance.

Common Core Goals

- The Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and literacy in history and social studies seek “To help ensure that all students are college and career ready in literacy”
- Promote close attentive reading
- Foster deep and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts

GOAL

To model what it looks like to read rich, difficult historical and informational texts and frame the sort of questions that meet the Common Core

FROM THE FORUM

Challenges, Issues, Questions

- What is close reading?
- I would like to learn more about techniques for active reading.
- I would like to learn some strategies to break up long readings so that students will be able to maintain their focus
- How can we prevent students from being intimidated by a text?
- How can we make close reading accessible to students who are struggling with reading?



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*Daughters of Time: Creating Women's
Voice in Southern Story*
1992

What is close reading?

When we do close reading, we go through a text carefully, examining and putting together all the striking elements of the text that produce its meanings. We trace patterns and make connections. As we read, we use as evidence the key, relevant language tools (we will list these below) that a text gives us in order to gain a clear understanding of the author's ideas and purposes.

NOTE

In many cases you will **not** be able to do a close reading of an entire text.

Select a **manageable excerpt** that illuminates key themes or other elements in the full text and that offers something you and your students can work with.

- Keep the end in mind. What understanding(s) do you want your students to take away from the unit/lesson/whole text?
- Identify an excerpt (or excerpts) that points the way to the broader understandings you want students to comprehend.
- Determine how much contextualizing information your students will need to make sense of the text/excerpt: author, publication date and location, purpose, historical context, etc.
- Determine how much defining, translating, annotating, etc. you will have to do to make the language of the excerpt intelligible to your students.
- Analyze the excerpt to frame the specific understanding you want students to take away from it. This “excerpt understanding” should align with the broader intellectual goals of the unit or lesson.
- Identify specific details in the passage that will lead students to the excerpt understanding.
- Frame close reading questions and strategies to focus analysis on those details.

The Instructor's Task

The instructor's task in teaching through close reading is to **analyze** a text (can be an excerpt) to frame an understanding of it and then to **translate** that analysis into close reading questions and strategies that lead students to discover the understanding. The process is guided by the overarching intellectual themes or goals of the unit or lesson.

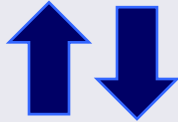
Teacher Analyzes Text



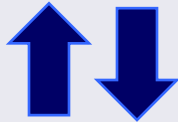
Begin where students begin. Dive into text.

Ask the same sort of questions you will ask the students.

Guided by unit/lesson themes or goals.



Teacher Frames Understanding



Teacher Develops Close Reading Strategies



Students Discover Understanding

When using close reading to arrive at an understanding, teachers often frame two types of questions:

- Text-dependent: questions that can be answered **ONLY** by referring to the text
- Concept: questions that can be answered by drawing upon prior knowledge.

Examples

Using Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life* to illustrate the value of literacy to the enslaved:

Text-dependent questions: What image of himself does Douglass present in the first two sentences of this excerpt? What words create that image?

A student can answer this question only by referring directly to the *Narrative*.

Concept question: Why would slave owners consider it “unsafe” to teach slaves to read?

While this question relates to the *Narrative*, a student could answer it on the basis of prior knowledge without referring to the text.

- Not every text is appropriate for close reading.
- Some simply do not offer much to talk about.
- Texts that repay close reading are complex in a variety of ways: organization, paragraph and sentence structure, vocabulary and use of language, levels of meaning, purpose, clarity, knowledge demands.
- When selecting a text, a teacher should also consider the ability of students and the purpose of the lesson.

Contextualizing Elements

Historical context:

- When was it published?
- Where was it published?

Audience:

- For whom was it written?

Purpose/Intent:

- Why was it written?

Language Tools to Consider When Framing Close Reading Questions

- diction (word choice)
- the connotative and denotative meanings of words
- the impact of words
- repetition of words and phrases
- figures of speech
- rhythm
- sentence variation
- sentences and their structure
- paragraphs and their structure
- imagery
- symbolism
- logic of presentation or argument
- strategies of presentation or argument
- point of view
- voice
- multiple perspectives
- organization and arrangement of ideas
- transitions
- tone/mood
- inferences
- implications
- evidence
- strategic silences
- audience
- the author's intent/purpose (to the extent we can discern it)
- historical context
- setting
- theme, central idea, thesis

It is important to note that we will **NOT** focus on every element in our list in every text. For close reading each text will require its own distinctive set of sharply focused, fine-grained questions. Some examples:

Focusing on the word:

- What **connotations** does the word _____ convey?
- How do these **connotations** shape the meaning of the sentence/paragraph?
- How does the meaning/**tone** of the sentence/paragraph change if we substitute another word for _____?
- Does the word _____ convey both a literal and a more **symbolic** meaning?
- What effect does the **repetition** of the word _____ have?
- What does the writer suggest by her use of **metaphor/simile/analogy (figurative language)**?

Focusing on the sentence:

- How/why does the writer employ parallelism (**sentence structure**)?
- What is the effect of the writer's use of sentences of varying lengths (**sentence structure, strategies of presentation, sentence variation**)?
- How does the writer link one sentence to another (**organization of ideas, argument, transitions**)?

Focusing on the paragraph:

- How does the writer link one paragraph to another (**organization of ideas, transitions**)?
- How does the writer develop the paragraph (**organization of ideas, paragraph structure, argument**)? (Example, compare/contrast, definition, narrative, details, etc.)
- Citing evidence from the text, describe how the author distinguishes her views from those of the character speaking (**multiple perspectives**)?
- What is the **thesis** of the paragraph?

Focusing on the whole:

- Citing evidence from the text, what is the author's/character's **point of view**?
- Why did the author write this (**purpose, intent**): to persuade, report, inspire, etc? Referring to the text, identify **strategies of presentation** she has used to achieve her goal?
- Who is the author's intended **audience**? Citing evidence from the text, speculate on how the author's vision of the **audience** shaped the information she included and **excluded (strategic silences)**?
- What is the **thesis** of the piece?

NOTE

You need **NOT** focus on every element in our list in every text.

Each text will require its own distinctive set of questions, based upon what we want our students to get out of the text.

Assumption

Non-fiction tends to be simply a progression of facts or information. Questions of “literary” style, voice, diction, are not important.

Response

All good writing employs language tools. Writers draw upon any and all devices that will aid in persuading, getting across a key point, helping readers to understand their arguments: repetition, word choice, symbolism, tone, figurative language, sentence variety and balance, silences, etc. are ALL important.

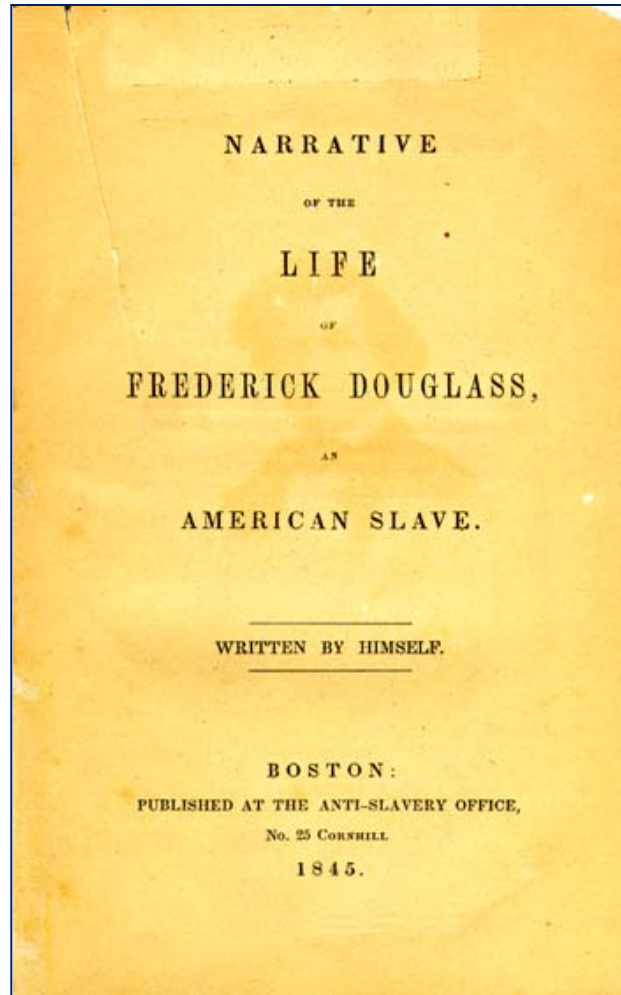
Thus we can approach much non-fiction in the same way we approach literature. However, the **contextualizing elements** may loom larger when we critique non-literary works.

Narrative of the Life, by Frederick Douglass

A Common Core Exemplar Text



Frontispiece



Title Page

Contextualizing Questions

- Who wrote it?
- When was it published?
- Where was it published?
- Who was the intended audience?
- Why was it written?

What do the answers to these questions tell us?

What is the relationship between the picture of Douglass and the text?

Understanding

In this passage Douglass discovers the denial of learning as the source of his oppression and understands that literacy will provide him the pathway from slavery to freedom. It represents the starting point in his journey from innocence to experience. At the outset he is both slave and student, essentially a child who needs help. In an ironic turn, he receives the forbidden knowledge he needs to become a free man from his oppressor. The passage also illustrates how slaveholders used the denial of literacy as a means of control.

Chapter 6

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell [a unit of length equal to 45 inches]. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy."

Close Reading Questions

- What image of himself does Douglass present in the first two sentences (**imagery**)?
- What words create that image (**diction**)?
- Why might Douglass have chosen to use the term "A,B,C" rather than "alphabet" (**diction**)?
- Why does Douglass switch from paraphrase to direct quote when delivering the words of Mr. Auld (**multiple perspectives**)? What is the effect of this change?
- How does Douglass's **diction** as narrator differs from that of Mr. Auld? What distinctions is Douglass making between himself and his master through this device?

Chapter 6

He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy.” These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom.

Close Reading Questions

- All of the southern states enacted laws to prohibit the teaching of reading and writing to slaves. How does Douglass explain, through his dramatization of Mr. Auld's prescription to his wife, the reasoning behind such laws (**multiple perspectives**)?
- What does it suggest about Mr. Auld's attitude toward Douglass that he would say what he does in Douglass's presence (**inference**)?
- In what way is this paragraph, and the entire *Narrative*, an ironic commentary on Mr. Auld's speech (**thesis**)?
- Compare Douglass's language before and after Mr. Auld's speech. How does it differ (**diction**)?
- Douglass withholds the thesis sentence until the end. Why did he place it there? Why not at the beginning (**thesis, organization**)?

Understanding

Tan explores the ways in which our language use, how we speak and write, shapes our identity, how we define who we are and how we are seen by others.

Lately, I've been giving more thought to the kind of English my mother speaks. Like others, I have described it to people as "broken" or "fractured" English. But I wince when I say that. It has always bothered me that I can think of no way to describe it other than "broken," as if it were damaged and needed to be fixed, as if it lacked a certain wholeness and soundness. I've heard other terms used, "limited English," for example. But they seem just as bad, as if everything is limited, including people's perceptions of the limited English speaker.

Close Reading Questions

- What strikes you about this paragraph?
- What close reading questions would you ask?

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Close Reading Questions

- What is the **thesis** of this paragraph?
- How does Tan develop this paragraph (**paragraph structure**)?
- Question about repetition.

I have been thinking about all this lately, about my mother’s English, about achievement tests. Because lately I’ve been asked, as a writer, why there are not more Asian Americans represented in American literature. Why are there few Asian Americans enrolled in creative writing programs? Why do so many Chinese students go into engineering! Well, these are broad sociological questions I can’t begin to answer. But I have noticed in surveys—in fact, just last week—that Asian students, as a whole, always do significantly better on math achievement tests than in English. And this makes me think that there are other Asian-American students whose English spoken in the home might also be described as “broken” or “limited.” And perhaps they also have teachers who are steering them away from writing and into math and science, which is what happened to me.

Close Reading Questions

- How does Tan link paragraph 1 to paragraph 2 (**organization**)? Identify the transitional words.
- Citing evidence from the text, characterize the **tone** of this paragraph.

Fortunately, I happen to be rebellious in nature and enjoy the challenge of disproving assumptions made about me. I became an English major my first year in college, after being enrolled as pre-med. I started writing nonfiction as a freelancer the week after I was told by my former boss that writing was my worst skill and I should hone my talents toward account management.

Close Reading Questions

- What is the **thesis** of this paragraph?
- How does Tan develop this paragraph (**organization**)?

But it wasn't until 1985 that I finally began to write fiction. And at first I wrote using what I thought to be wittily crafted sentences, sentences that would finally prove I had mastery over the English language.

Here's an example from the first draft of a story that later made its way into *The Joy Luck Club*, but without this line: "That was my mental quandary in its nascent state." A terrible line, which I can barely pronounce.

Close Reading Questions

- Compare the language of the "terrible" line with the language of the rest of the piece. How does it differ? (**diction**)
- Why would Tan think it "terrible"?

Fortunately, for reasons I won't get into today, I later decided I should envision a reader for the stories I would write. And the reader I decided upon was my mother, because these were stories about mothers. So with this reader in mind—and in fact she did read my early drafts—I began to write stories using all the Englishes I grew up with: the English I spoke to my mother, which for lack of a better term might be described as “simple”; the English she used with me, which for lack of a better term might be described as “broken”; my translation of her Chinese, which could certainly be described as “watered down”; and what I imagined to be her translation of her Chinese if she could speak in perfect English, her internal language, and for that I sought to preserve the essence, but neither an English nor a Chinese structure. I wanted to capture what language ability tests can never reveal: her intent, her passion, her imagery, the rhythms of her speech and the nature of her thoughts.

Close Reading Questions

- How does Tan develop this paragraph?
(organization, structure)
- What different identities does Tan identify in her list of “Englishes”?
(inference)

Apart from what any critic had to say about my writing, I knew I had succeeded where it counted when my mother finished reading my book and gave me her verdict: “So easy to read.”

Close Reading Questions

- Discuss the humor and irony of Tan’s last sentence, words of her mother. Is the English “broken”?
- What is the significance of the title?

Understanding

Collins builds classic elements of argumentation into a narrative that subtly moves us to assent to the proposition that what we normally consider “business” thinking is not the sole province of business at all.

1. We must reject the idea—well-intentioned, but dead wrong—that the primary path to greatness in the social sectors is to become “more like a business.” Most businesses—like most of anything else in life—fall somewhere between mediocre and good. Few are great. When you compare great companies with good ones, many widely practiced business norms turn out to correlate with mediocrity, not greatness. So, then, why would we want to import the practices of mediocrity into the social sectors?

Close Reading Questions

- What is the effect of Collins’s use of the pronoun “we” throughout the passage? (**diction, strategy of presentation**)
- Characterizes Collins’s tone. Support your description by citing words from the text. (**diction**)
- What is Collins’s **thesis**?
- What **argument** does he make to support it?
- What is the effect of the short sentence “Few are great”? (**sentence variation**)
- If you were rewriting this paragraph to strengthen the argument, where might you present more evidence? What sort would you use? (**argument**)
- Why does Collins make his last sentence in the paragraph a question? (**argument**)

2. I shared this perspective with a gathering of business CEOs, and offended nearly everyone in the room. A hand shot up from David Weekley, one of the more thoughtful CEOs—a man who built a very successful company and who now spends nearly half his time working with the social sectors. “Do you have evidence to support your point?” he demanded. “In my work with nonprofits, I find that they’re in desperate need of greater discipline—disciplined planning, disciplined people, disciplined governance, disciplined allocation of resources.

3. “What makes you think that’s a business concept?” I replied. “Most businesses also have a desperate need for greater discipline. Mediocre companies rarely display the relentless culture of discipline—disciplined people who engage in disciplined thought and who take disciplined action—that we find in truly great companies. A culture of discipline is not a principle of business; it is a principle of greatness.”

Close Reading Questions

- How do the verbs “shot up” and “demanded” shape the tone of paragraph 2? How would alternative choices—“Weekley raised his hand”; “he asked”—change the tone? (**diction**)
- Why does Collins repeat the word “discipline”? What effect does the repetition have both thematically and dramatically? (**repetition**)
- Why does Collins use direct quotes to make Weekley’s point and his own? How effective is this strategy? Why? (**presentation strategy**)
- What role do paragraphs 2 and 3 play in Collins’s argument? (**argument**)
- How does Collins link the paragraphs 2 and 3? (**transition**)

4. Later, at dinner, we continued our debate, and I asked Weekley: “If you had taken a different path in life and become, say, a church leader, a university president, a nonprofit leader, a hospital CEO, or a school superintendent, would you have been any less disciplined in your approach? Would you have been less likely to practice enlightened leadership, or put less energy into getting the right people on the bus, or been less demanding of results?” Weekley considered the question for a long moment. “No, I suspect not.”

5. That’s when it dawned on me: we need a new language. The critical distinction is not between business and social, but between great and good. We need to reject the naive imposition of the “language of business” on the social sectors, and instead jointly embrace a language of greatness.

Close Reading Questions

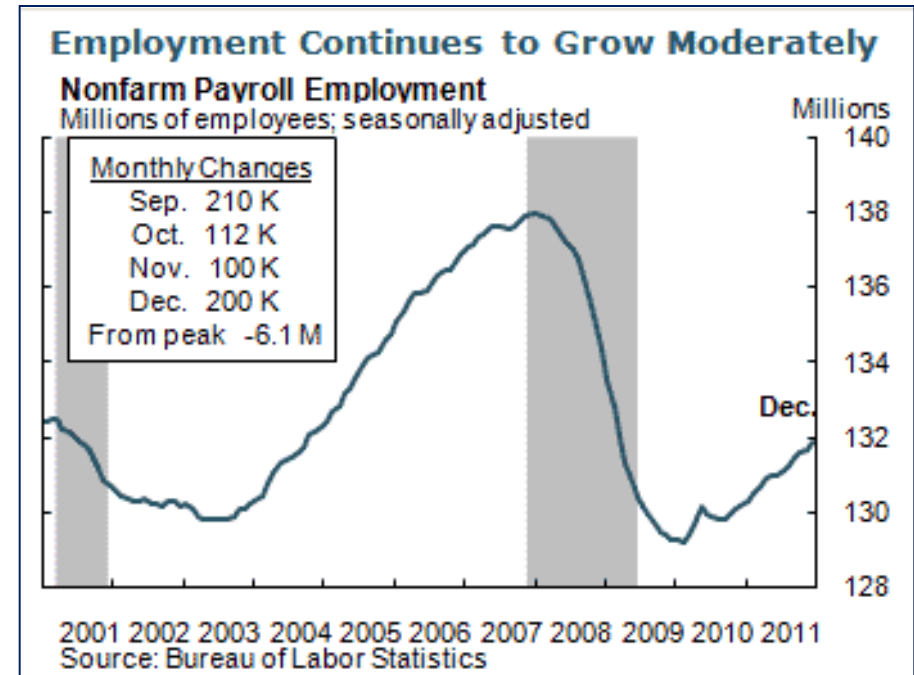
- In terms of Collin’s argument, how do paragraphs 2, 3, and 4 relate to paragraph 1? (**argument**)
- How effective is his strategy of presenting his argument in the form of a conversation? Why is it effective or ineffective? (**presentation strategy, argument**)
- What purpose does the final paragraph serve? (**presentation strategy, thesis**)

Understanding

Swanson is making a case for a set of predictions: that GDP growth will be moderate in the first half of 2012, the recovery should gradually pick up steam over 2012 and into 2013, unemployment will fall only slightly, and inflation should fall over coming months.

A Common Core Text Exemplar

1. The number of employees on nonfarm payrolls rose by a seasonally adjusted 200,000 in December, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Private-sector payrolls gained about 212,000, while state, local, and federal government payrolls fell by about 12,000 jobs. The increase in nonfarm payrolls was somewhat higher than the average over the past several months, but nevertheless below the rate of job growth in a typical recovery. Even in 2004-07, payrolls grew at a substantially stronger rate than at present. Moreover, the total number of employees on nonfarm payrolls remains about 6.1 million workers fewer than at the start of the recession, a dramatic shortfall.



Can we do close reading with this kind of dry memo?

If so, what kinds of questions will open it to careful, productive reading?

Title

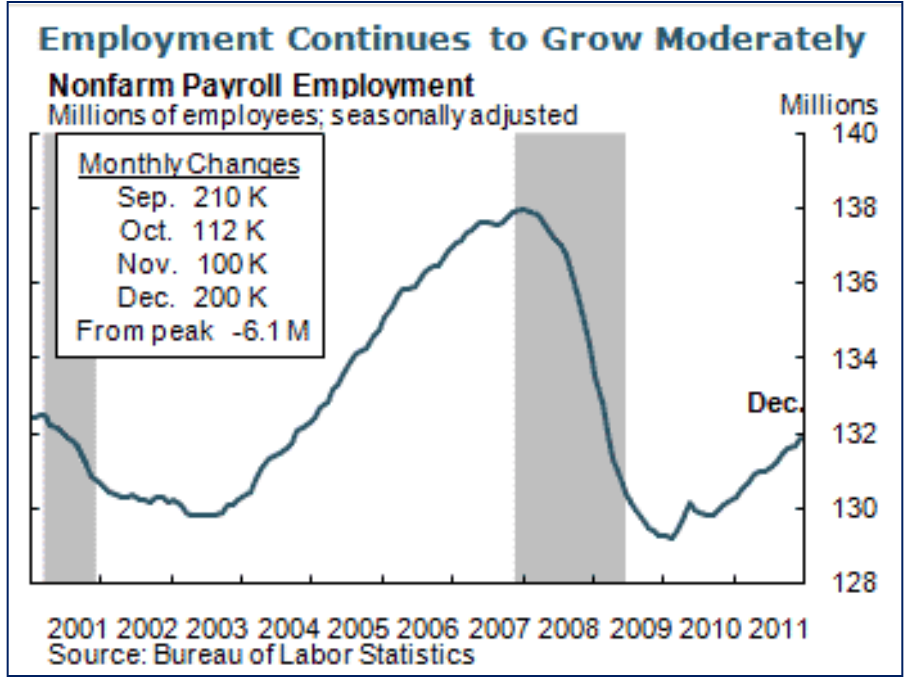
Eric Swanson, senior research advisor at the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, states his views on the current economy and the outlook.

Contextual Questions

- What does the title tell us?
- How would you characterize the genre of this document?
- When was it written?
- Why was it written? (What is its purpose?)
- For whom was it written? (Who is the intended audience?)
- Why would someone read this? (What value does it have for the reader?)

A Common Core Text Exemplar

1. The number of employees on nonfarm payrolls rose by a seasonally adjusted 200,000 in December, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Private-sector payrolls gained about 212,000, while state, local, and federal government payrolls fell by about 12,000 jobs. The increase in nonfarm payrolls was somewhat higher than the average over the past several months, but nevertheless below the rate of job growth in a typical recovery. Even in 2004-07, payrolls grew at a substantially stronger rate than at present. Moreover, the total number of employees on nonfarm payrolls remains about 6.1 million workers fewer than at the start of the recession, a dramatic shortfall.



How does the graph relate to the text?

2. The unemployment rate fell by a seasonally adjusted 0.2 percentage point in December to 8.5%. Over the past three months, the unemployment rate has fallen 0.5 percentage point, a substantial decline. However, even with the recent declines, the unemployment rate remains far above its level in the 2001 recession and subsequent recovery. Initial claims for unemployment insurance provide a broadly similar perspective on the labor market.

. . .

8. Data over the past month have led to relatively little change in our forecast. We think that gross domestic product expanded at about a 3.2% annual rate in the fourth quarter of 2011, partly reflecting transitory factors such as a buildup of manufacturing inventories. We expect GDP growth to moderate in the first half of 2012, averaging only about an annualized 2.1%. The recovery should gradually pick up steam over 2012 and into 2013. This pace of growth is likely to be too slow to bring the unemployment rate down much. We expect that unemployment will fall only slightly below 8.5% by the end of this year and to only a bit less than 8% by the end of 2013.

9. Recent data on core inflation, as measured by the personal consumption expenditures price index excluding food and energy, have come in at an annual rate of about 1.5%. Given the lack of wage pressures, we expect these muted readings to continue. Overall inflation, including the prices of food and energy, has trended down lately. Twelve-month average inflation should fall over coming months as some of the larger price increases early in 2011 get left behind. We expect overall inflation to gradually return to the level of core inflation, about 1.5%.

Fine-Grained Questions

- How do verbs and other concrete, descriptive words, provide ways to “see” the abstract ideas involved?
- How do the opening (transitional) sentences of each paragraph mark a change what kind of information will be addressed (topic)?
- Is there a “character,” an identifiable voice, in this piece?
- Characterize the tone. What words/phrases establish the tone?

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- Is Swanson making an argument?
- If so, what strategies does he employ?
- What kind of information might he have included that he does NOT include?
- What traditional elements of argumentation has he omitted?
- What is the thesis of the piece as a whole?

Assessment: *Narrative of the Life . . .*

Part A: Which of the following sentences best states an important theme about the relationship between slaves and masters in the American South as described in Douglass's *Narrative*.

- a. Both slaves and masters knew that reading was important.
- b. Slavery depended on keeping slaves ignorant.
- c. Masters secretly feared their slaves.
- d. Masters sought to keep their slaves content.

Part B: Select three pieces of evidence from Douglass's *Narrative* that support the answer to Part A.

- a. "Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C."
- b. "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him."
- c. Reading "would would make him discontented and unhappy."
- d. "He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master."
- e. "I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom."
- f. "Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world."

Assessment: *Mother Tongue*

Part A: Which of the following statements best describes the discovery Amy Tan makes in *Mother Tongue*.

- a. She really could not master English.
- b. Her mother's "broken" English was an inadequate form of communication.
- c. In her stories she had to create her own mother tongue.
- d. Achievement tests adequately measure the effectiveness of one's use of language.

Part B: Select three sentences that describe steps that most directly led Tan to the discovery of Part A.

- a. "I . . . noticed in surveys . . . that Asian students, as a whole, always do significantly better on math achievement tests than in English."
- b. "I became an English major my first year in college, after being enrolled as pre-med."
- c. "I . . . decided I should envision a reader for the stories I would write. And the reader I decided on was my mother."
- d. "I began to write stories using all the Englishes I grew up with."
- e. "I wanted to capture what language ability tests can never reveal."

Final Slide

Thank you