Part One: Analyzing Our Lives and Literature

“When we’re thinking about possible lessons stories teach, readers know that events in our lives are open to analysis, just as events in literature are. Often we are inspired to think about lessons in our lives by how we think about stories, and vice versa—we can learn lessons from characters and moments in stories, not just from the people and moments in our lives. We may, therefore, reconsider stories we’ve lived or read and rethink them in terms of the lessons or ideas they suggest. We keep in mind that good stories are about more than one idea. There may be many possible meanings of a story.”

“Often there are pivotal moments in stories that may suggest ideas to the reader. As we read, therefore, we may keep asking ourselves, ‘What is this story starting to be about?’ One kind of moment to be alert to as a reader is a moment when a character makes a critical choice. At a moment like this we as readers may learn significant lessons about the traits of the main character and how those traits compare with our own. In complicated storylines, those traits may change.”

“Readers remember that there are many interpretations of any single event in a story. Just as characters in the story have different perspectives on any event, readers will bring different perspectives. One way to open up to more ideas is to consider the various perspectives of characters and readers and the points of view they may bring to what an event means.”

“As readers keep asking ourselves, ‘What is this story starting to be about?’ we also remain open to revising our original ideas as the story develops. We expect to back up our ideas with evidence from the text, and we mark, collect, and ponder moments in the text that support our ideas.”

“Just as stories are about more than one idea, ideas live in more than one story and across literature and nonfiction. Readers begin to compare texts that share similar themes, recalling texts we’ve already read and remaining alert to new texts, both literary and nonfiction, that seem to deal with similar ideas or themes.”

Part Two: Analyzing Differences: Becoming a More Nuanced Reader

“In texts that suggest similar themes, readers often analyze differences in the texts and how those differences affect possible meanings. One difference we may focus on is the difference in setting—in the time and place stories occur—and how it affects the way a theme or idea develops.”

“As readers begin to compare texts, we often need to develop some systems to help us recall the texts we’ve read. Sometimes making charts that list the titles, issues or themes, and characters helps us quickly recall texts so that we can move on to analyzing them. Often when we compare a text we’ve read before with one we are reading now, we return to the previous text itself, revisiting parts that
seem important.”

“Just as we may analyze the differences in the settings of stories that are linked by theme, knowledgeable readers often analyze the differences in characters as well. We may pay attention to their backgrounds, pressures, perspectives, how they respond to trouble, and how those characteristics affect the way the text suggests particular aspects of an idea or theme.”

“As we begin to think and talk about the ways in which characters respond to trouble in thematically linked texts, we may compare those choices to ones we make ourselves in our own lives, with the goal of thinking how character traits are always revisable, whether they exist in the pages of a book or article or are our own traits.”

“Just as an athlete accesses all his or her skills from the moment a competition begins, so readers access all our reading practices from the moment we start reading. We try to process what is happening in the story, at the same time asking ourselves, ‘What is this story starting to be about?’ And then we keep adding new information and having new insights as we read.”

Part Three: Analyzing Literary Devices and How We Are Affected by Texts

“One way readers are moved by literature is by symbols that seem significant. Often we may pay attention to objects that are repeated in the text, and those objects may be laden with potential meaning.”

“Another part of the text that is often symbolic is the title. Readers often think and talk about the potential meaning of the title, both part way through our reading and when we finish a text.”

“Readers are often alert to foreshadowing, or what is known as ‘Chekov’s gun.’ We know that in good stories, details matter, and we are alert to the potential meanings that reside in otherwise perplexing or unexplained details. Often when later moments remind us of something that occurred earlier, we find ourselves rapidly rereading earlier parts of the text.”

“Readers are also alert to repetition—to lines or scenes that feel parallel. Usually there will be significance in those repeated moments, and readers think about their potential meaning.”

“We may consider, as well, the various perspectives and points of view that are represented in the text in any given moment and across the text and how they affect that meanings that are conveyed. We may compare the points of view of various characters with our own and consider as well whose points of view are
invisible or partial and how that affects the text’s meaning.”

“Readers may consider the literary tradition, especially the archetypes and narrative arcs that usually inform this tradition, and then consider how a text follows or transgresses this tradition and how that relates to the meaning of the text.”