

QAR and CRISS®

By Donald W. Meints

Unquestionably, the most important goal of Project CRISS is for students to become independent learners and to comprehend text material at a significant level of understanding. In my experience, there is no better way to get students to think as they read than with Taffy Raphael's Question-Answer Relationship strategy (1983). The Question-Answer Relationships (QARs) require students to engage and interact with the text in ways that develop understanding.

This very powerful strategy is one of the most important components of a CRISS training. Students who become adept at formulating QAR questions are certain to attain a deeper understanding of expository text material. For this reason, QARs should be presented in a thorough and complete manner.

To introduce the QAR strategy in a training session, I always begin by having a participant read a sentence such as, *The fluvvy magruns platted quizzily with the doogy frentons*. After the person has pronounced the words in that sentence, I congratulate him/her on the good reading, but express my concern as to whether the sentence was understood. So the next step is to ask the person to answer five comprehension questions based on the reading:

1. What kind of magruns were they?
2. What did the magruns do?
3. How did they do it?
4. What did the magruns plat with?
5. What kind of frentons were they?

Of course these questions are easily answered correctly, but the crucial question is, "Does answering questions correctly mean the person has understood the material?" and, of course, the answer is a resounding "No" from the group. We contend many of our students are able to write the correct answer on a worksheet or a workbook page, and yet they have no idea what they are reading. It is important we get students to think about the real meanings in textbooks and other classroom materials.

I have heard from some teachers who attempted to present the QAR strategy to students that the results were very disappointing. Sometimes, the teachers became frustrated and gave up, thinking the students were not able to understand such a complex strategy. Perhaps, the single most important reason students do not "get" the QAR strategy is that it is not modeled thoroughly enough for them to understand and be able to use. The teaching of QARs requires a thorough, step-by-step process with enough modeling for the level and ability of the students to whom it is presented.

After explaining the four types of QARs using the chart in the CRISS manual (page 288 in the 3rd edition; page 51, 2nd edition), I find *introduction and modeling* followed by *guided practice and reflection* works well in presenting this strategy for the first time.

Introduction and Modeling

With students, I begin by explaining the four types of questions. Then, using the fairytale of *Goldilocks*, I give examples of each type of question and explain how the questions relate to the information in the story (the answers):

Right There: Where were the Bears when Goldilocks went to their house?

Think and Search: What things did Goldilocks do in the Bears' house? In what ways did Goldilocks trespass in the Bears' house?

Author and You: What kind of girl is Goldilocks? Be prepared to support your answer. Discuss whether Goldilocks is/is not a juvenile delinquent.

On My Own: Discuss if it is ever right to infringe on the rights of other people? Discuss whether it is ever right to help yourself to other people's possessions (global, thematic questions which go beyond the text).

Guided Practice and Reflection

When students understand the explanation at this level, we go to another text ("Old Horse" used in our CRISS Level I training or any well-written article appropriate for the age and abilities of the students). In groups, I have students generate the four levels of questions and share them. Discussion includes the kinds of questions developed and the problems incurred while constructing them.

In the event further guided practice is needed, the stories by Dr. Seuss provide an excellent source of material. Those stories can often be read at the explicit level as well as the implicit level of understanding. An excellent example is *Yertle the*

Turtle, which can be read by a child as a cute story about a turtle or it can be interpreted by a mature reader as a lesson on how absolute power can corrupt. You will find many Dr. Seuss stories lend themselves well to modeling and practicing the QAR procedure.

Because the purpose of the higher level *In My Head* questions is to get at the deeper meaning of text, students must be cautioned these questions require more than one word or simple “yes” or “no” answers. According to Raphael, the question must be constructed in a manner that requires critical thinking on the part of the person answering the question. A question such as, “Do you think (character) is a good person?” is of little value because it can be answered perfunctorily with a casual yes or no. However the same question when phrased as “Discuss the attributes of (character) and explain why these are important in the story” can be thought-provoking and can elicit a good response.

When students understand the different types of questions, it is time for guided practice using classroom materials. In small groups, have students generate the various types of QAR questions. Then, as a whole group, they critique each other’s questions. This will insure clear understanding of the process.

Adaptations

The QAR strategy is not necessarily limited to written text. I have used it effectively in an art class. Students observed a painting or sculpture and then wrote the four types of questions based on the work. The oil painting *The Absinthe Drinker* by Edgar Degas works well because it is full of mystery and interest.

Some sample questions evoked from the work were:

Right There: In what place are the two people in the painting?

Think and Search: In what different areas of the painting do you see the same color?

Artist and You: In what kind of mood is the woman in the painting and what could be the reason for that mood?

On My Own: Pick a powerful emotion (for example, loneliness, unhappiness, fear, or jubilation) and describe an action or activity you could draw along with at least three colors you would use to represent that emotion.

In addition, the application of QARs can be made in a music class after listening to an excerpt or a complete vocal or instrumental composition. *Carnival of the Animals* by Camille Saint-Saëns is one students can enjoy for both its beauty and humor. It could elicit some interesting QAR questions:

Right There: What animal is described by the cello?

Think and Search: Which animals in the piece are mammals?

Composer and You: Why does Saint-Saëns use the xylophone to depict the fossils?

On My Own: Discuss various moods that can be created by different instruments. Give at least three examples.

In social studies, QARs are excellent for helping students interpret political cartoons. Teachers often find students can arrive at thoughtful conclusions when they delve into the cartoons in pairs or triads. They reach deeper levels of meaning in the drawings through the use of QARs.

In mathematics and science, students can reach a higher level of comprehension from graphs and charts when they have to develop QARs over the information portrayed in the diagrams.

Conclusion

The QAR strategy, when properly presented and modeled, is a powerful way to teach students how to grasp the deep meaning of text. When students become proficient with this strategy, they comprehend and retain the material better than ever. When you teach the QAR strategy, remember to model it thoroughly and monitor its use so it promotes good critical thinking.

About the author: Don Meints is a CRISS Master Trainer and educational consultant in Lockport, Illinois.



The Absinthe Drinker by Degas

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