

Another student's work of prose appears following.

### Step Inside: I am the Nile River . . .

By Davina

As the Nile River, I tend to travel constantly through Egypt, as if I am a whirlpool and there's no way of stopping myself. As I pass I spot women and children greeting me and using me to wash their clothes, or to collect water. Animals indulge in my waters, and I support boats and others who swim in me. Farms, people, animals and plants live off me. People use me for fishing and I am surrounded by vegetation. If I look into the distance I can see the Red Lands. Plants of food grow because of me and people with weapons fight over me. People are living because of me. Children play on the banks.

I feel powerful because I am a source of life. I feel used, exploited because I am open to everyone. I feel that I am the centre of gravity. I give fruit water and nourishment. At times I feel terrible because of the vegetation, people take my molecules of water — they are considered my friends. I am humbled because I notice the impact that I have. However, I want to help the Red Lands. It is very dry there. I feel disrespected, because if I am considered holy, then why do people dirty me?

I feel I am helping the environment and people, and I have the ability to save people. I tend to feel guilty at times for starting wars, because people fight over me. I feel special because I watch and am a part of sacrifices. I feel proud and happy.

Sharonne was surprised by the quality and detail of the writing. "Before I have asked students to pretend they were someone or something else, but there was never the detail that I saw in these poems and prose. By deconstructing the information in the steps of the routine, it's like you are looking at a building, but not just seeing its shape, but really noticing the individual bricks. There are things you can't see if you don't take some of the bricks apart. Step Inside enables people to 'see' things that they might otherwise have missed if all they saw was the whole building—the overarching theme."

Reflecting on students' learning as evidenced in both the poems and prose written after doing Step Inside, Sharonne observed, "It provides opportunities to pay attention to details and intricacies and slows the process down so there are fewer pat answers and the students notice things they wouldn't always notice. If I had asked them to pretend to be the Nile, they would have fallen back on clichés. A peaceful atmosphere was created, it was calmer with thoughts flowing and time to document."

## RED LIGHT, YELLOW LIGHT

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As you read, view, or listen to the material before you, consider the following questions:

- What are the *red lights* here? That is, what things stop you in your tracks as a reader/listener/observer because you doubt their truth or accuracy?
- What are the *yellow lights* here? That is, what things slow you down a bit, give you pause, and make you wonder if they are true and accurate or not?

In our research into the development of thinking dispositions, we identified a key place where dispositions falter: the spotting of occasions for application. People often have the thinking skill, but they fail to use that skill because they didn't spot occasions for its use. This led our colleague David Perkins to develop the Red Light, Yellow Light (RLYL) routine that focused specifically on the spotting of occasions to be skeptical and ask questions. Spotting these occasions would cause students to be more active listeners and readers, to have their skepticism antennae up if you will. Using the metaphor of a traffic light, students are encouraged to think in terms of green lights giving them the freedom to continue, yellow lights as slowing them down, and red lights as stopping them.

### Purpose

Red Light, Yellow Light is about becoming more aware of specific moments that hold signs of possible puzzles of truth. Sweeping generalizations, blatant self-interests, oversimplified conclusions, unexpressed bias, hidden motives, and so on can easily come off as incontestable or perhaps even invisible. If students are to develop deep understanding of a topic, they have to learn to see the potential falsehoods and to handle them in ways that aren't dismissive, overlooked, or debilitating. Red Light, Yellow Light should be used often in deliberately different ways to build sensitivity to spotting potential puzzles of truth within claims, ideas, conclusions, generalizations, and so on.

### Selecting Appropriate Content

The most suitable content for Red Light, Yellow Light would be source material that presents particular stances, claims, conclusions, or generalizations. Opinion articles in a magazine, mysteries that have yet to be solved, mathematical proofs that might have

some weaknesses present are all possible good fits for students to do some Red Light, Yellow Light thinking. Situations outside of school could also prove to be useful content for this routine: regulations for potentially risky behaviors, playground arguments, proposals for fundraising for a class trip, and the like.

One thing to keep in mind with Red Light, Yellow Light is to make sure the issue, problem, conflict, or controversy is large enough so that a variety of red lights and yellow lights can be identified. If the source is too small, there isn't likely to be rich conversation about potential problems of truth to be alert to. Likewise, if the red and yellow lights all stem from the same source or force a global attribution, for example, "This newspaper is always biased so I would never believe anything," then discussions will be less useful in helping students to identify different sources and reasons for red and yellow lights. Examining chapters in a book or keeping track of a current media debate over a few days can help students stay alert to puzzles of truth in sustained ways.

## Steps

1. *Set up.* Briefly introduce the source material that will be used. You don't want to say anything that will prejudice the reading. In some instances you may not want to even disclose the source. Tell students you want them to dig below the surface of the ideas, issues, or findings that may be present in the material.
2. *Look for red lights and yellow lights.* Ask students working individually, in pairs, or even in small groups to search the source for specific moments and signs of possible puzzles of truth. Using the spotlight metaphor, red lights could be framed as glaring, halting places. Yellow lights are places to proceed with a little care and caution. Everything else is an implicit green light. You might even want to give students red and yellow markers for this purpose.
3. *Collect students' observations and reasons.* Make a list of specific points marked R for red or Y for yellow as students offer them to the group. Also note specific "zones" that students identify as mostly red or yellow. Ask students to provide their reasons as to why they've categorized a particular point or zone as red or yellow. Document these reasons as well.
4. *Share the thinking.* Once a collected list of red lights and yellow lights has been created, have the class stand back and look at the documentation. Ask, "What have we learned about particular signs that indicate there could be a problem or puzzle of truth? What have we learned about zones to watch out for?" Allow students to share their thoughts and reasons.

## Uses and Variations

In his facilitation of professional learning communities in the Traverse City Area Public Schools in Michigan, Mark Church regularly makes use of the Red Light, Yellow Light routine. When teachers share their classroom efforts, student work, or reflections around professional readings, Mark uses Red Light, Yellow Light to move their conversation beyond merely agreeing or disagreeing with one another's ideas. "By creating an actual space for people to voice what possible red lights come up for them and what yellow lights seem to emerge, I notice that teachers listen more closely to each other and build on each others' thinking. Before it was more likely they would remain silent when a particular point was made that didn't sit particularly well with a group member," said Mark. "Red lights and yellow lights create a sense of safety to navigate difficult ideas instead of coming up against roadblocks as soon as conversations become difficult. Red lights and yellow lights are not hard and fast judgments; rather, they identify potential zones to keep our eyes on."

Another professional use of RLYL can occur around the discussion of action plans. School principals and department heads have made use of Red Light, Yellow Light when bringing forth proposals or plans of action to larger groups of stakeholders. Asking for the red lights and yellow lights that come up for those in the group helps leaders to convey a message that there will be natural points of dispute in any proposal that need working through. However, noticing these points collectively helps a group to tackle issues head on rather than become flustered by them.

Tony Cavell, a sixth grade teacher at Bialik, found the metaphor of red lights and yellow lights could be useful to students in monitoring their reading comprehension. When students read independently, he asked them to identify any passages in the text that slowed them down slightly as readers and those passages that seemed to stop them completely, for whatever reason. In discussing the text the next day, students would then share their red and yellow light passages and discuss what it was that caused them to slow down or stop. As a class, they were then able to talk about how readers deal with such red lights and yellow lights.

## Assessment

When using the Red Light, Yellow Light routine to get underneath the surface of ideas, there are several things a teacher may wish to pay attention to. What are you noticing about how readily students are identifying places of potential puzzles in what they read, hear, watch, or experience? As students identify various red lights or yellow lights, what are you noticing about their reasons for making such choices? It is important for a teacher



to develop a sense for how his or her students are developing as critical consumers of information. Also, taking note of the quality of assertions students themselves may offer in classroom discussions is important. Do you see them scrutinizing their own arguments, ideas, theories, and generalizations with red lights and yellow lights to catch their own overgeneralizations or weak arguments?

### Tips

It is easy for students to get into an “It’s all red!” or “It’s all yellow!” frame of mind once the search for red lights and yellow lights begins. Once this happens, rich classroom conversation is difficult to guide; students begin to see the issue as either one way or another—all black or white. This can happen when the source material starts with a red light, coloring everything that follows. When this is the case, a teacher should pull students back to identifying just one red light and one yellow light and reboot the conversation from there. This helps to redirect the class’s attention and keep the focus on teasing apart various nuances and complexities presented within puzzles of truth rather than moving quickly into an “all or nothing” judgment.

Teachers have also found it useful to acknowledge implicit green lights in sources their students are exploring. Helping students identify places where the claim is solid can be just as powerful as examining why other claims seem to make us stop and question. Many teachers have figured out ways to track red lights and yellow lights over time together with students, particularly when a topic is rich and covers a lot of territory. By keeping documentation of red and yellow lights visible and public, students begin to see Red Light, Yellow Light less as an isolated activity and more as a metaphor for a type of thinking they can bring to new learning situations. This ongoing practice helps foster an inclination to spot occasions when an idea presented as truth needs to be questioned more thoughtfully.

## A Picture of Practice

Tammy Lantz, a fifth grade teacher at Long Lake Elementary School in Traverse City, Michigan, has used thinking routines with her students for a number of years. She recalls that her initial use of thinking routines was as more of a stand-alone activity, not necessarily connected to any particular lesson. “I realize now that I needed to have that experience just to see where my kids’ thinking would go. It really was

engaging for them, I remember. I also remember having multiple *ah-hah* moments as my kids were sharing with me what thoughts were actually inside their heads.”

Recently, Tammy introduced Red Light, Yellow Light to her students, eager to see how it would aid their thinking. “Red Light, Yellow Light is a new routine for me,” said Tammy. “It feels a bit like going back to the beginning in terms of my feeling comfortable with its steps—unlike other routines that flow quite naturally. I can already see, though, how this routine is going to start dropping into my conversations with students more and more.”

Tammy decided to make use of a routine they were already familiar with and build upon it as a way of introducing the Red Light, Yellow Light routine. “I displayed some Claim-Support-Question samples I had kept from previous years when former students had expressed generalizations about the slave trade and the Middle Passage. Because my current students had already studied this topic and already knew the Claim-Support-Question routine, I thought this would be the perfect place to launch Red Light, Yellow Light.”

Tammy asked her current students to review claims offered by former students and to think about the strength of some of these claims. A few of the claims they looked at included:

- The Middle Passage took a long time.
- West Africans lived in freedom.
- West Africans feared a horrible trip across the Middle Passage.
- All slaves would rather die than suffer the voyage to America.

Tammy then explained the metaphor of a traffic light. She explained to her class, “Red lights make you stop and say, ‘Hey, wait a minute!’ and yellow lights sort of make you pause and say, ‘I see your point, but . . .’” She then asked her students to start making some mental notes of where red lights and yellow lights could possibly be in these claims. Tammy also pressed her students to not just point out red lights or yellow lights but to share with the class what makes them say that. She purposely put a range of samples up on the wall so her students would have some interesting things to talk about.

The students didn’t have much difficulty jumping right into this thinking routine. “It was a spirited conversation right from the beginning,” said Tammy. “It required them to remember back to some things they themselves had already studied and then challenge some of the claims I had posted on the board.” For example, many

students took issue with the vagueness of a claim, such as “The Middle Passage took a long time.” While they didn’t argue with the basic premise of that claim, Tammy’s students felt it was a bit yellow light, noting that “a long time” seemed too open and not concrete enough. Tammy’s students also critiqued the actual language of the posted claims, identifying potential red lights any time the words *all*, *never*, or *always* were used. Tammy felt the language of Red Light, Yellow Light helped her students examine these claims not only with a sense of healthy skepticism but also a sense of precision and veracity that pleased her.

Some days after introducing RLYL to her students, Tammy asked them to look through their social studies journals and find one of their own Claim-Support-Question entries to scrutinize using red lights and yellow lights. In doing so, Tammy wanted to draw students’ attention to being self-critical in their own claim making. Tammy had students join together with partners to look at each other’s selections, again asking them to watch for red lights and yellow lights as a way to help each other refine their claims and make them more solid. “I noticed how much better their own claims became when they interacted with each other in this way. They talked about each other’s ideas with one another and did not simply say, ‘Right or wrong,’” Tammy reported. “They offered each other valuable feedback using red and yellow lights. Everyone seemed really into it.”

Tammy believes that before too long, the language of this thinking routine will become a common phrase in the culture of her classroom: *What are our red lights here? Where are we seeing yellow lights in this material?* She believes this will become a natural routine to draw upon when the class encounters moments of disagreement or controversy. “Even though I’ve just started using this thinking routine, I see how red lights give students an opportunity to challenge a particular viewpoint with thoughtful reasoning. And when red lights seem a little harsh, yellow lights give students an opportunity to simply keep some ideas up for skepticism,” Tammy said. “I can already see that the scaffolding that Red Light, Yellow Light provides will truly promote conversations, feedback, and self-reflection that will be richer for my students.”

## CLAIM-SUPPORT-QUESTION

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Drawing on your investigation, experience, prior knowledge, or reading:

- Make a *claim* about the topic, issue, or idea being explored. A claim is an explanation or interpretation of some aspect of what is being examined.
- Identify *support* for your claim. What things do you see, feel, or know that lend evidence to your claim?
- Raise a *question* related to your claim. What may make you doubt the claim? What seems left hanging? What isn’t fully explained? What further ideas or issues does your claim raise?

For students to be more critical consumers of information, they need to become better at spotting and analyzing “truth claims.” These may be ideas and opinions that are being presented by the speaker or writer as facts but in actuality might be better thought of as generalizations, conjectures, hypotheses, or propositions. A collective way of referring to these is as *claims*. These claims need to be evaluated in terms of their supporting evidence as well as those things that make us question the validity of their claim. The Claim-Support-Question (CSQ) routine evolved from these steps.

### Purpose

Teachers and students come across declarations of fact or belief all the time. Claim-Support-Question is a thinking routine designed both to identify and to probe these claims. Identification of claims calls on students to look for patterns, spot generalizations, and identify assertions. Sometimes these come from others, but we can also put forth our own claims about what is going on based on our analysis of events or investigation of phenomena.

In classrooms in which explanations or interpretations are identified and discussed, conversations frequently tilt toward getting students to say whether they agree or disagree with a particular claim. Often this happens in a casual manner, without much depth or challenge. However, rarely are claims entirely black and white. One purpose of CSQ is to help students take notice of the claims presented, either as truths or as potential truths, and hold them up to thoughtful scrutiny. This thinking routine focuses students on evidence as the arbiter of the truth or validity of a claim: What support can we muster