

## INSTRUCTIONAL FOCUS: DISCUSSION

### What’s the purpose?

The purpose of this instructional focus is to build students’ capacity to actively participate in a book discussion while also helping them comprehend more deeply. Note that the purpose of this focus is *not* written response—although students may subsequently respond in writing to open-ended questions or to prompts in a reader’s notebook. For the most part, students will write answers to open-ended comprehension questions through whole-class shared-reading lessons and small-group lessons focused on specific comprehension objectives. Sometimes we just have to let kids talk!

### Who would benefit from this focus?

*All* students need the opportunity to talk about text. Discussion promotes student interaction, a critical factor in comprehension. Too many students are very passive readers; it’s hard to understand what you read when you’re not really engaging with the words on the page. We often hear about the importance of “engagement,” but what does engagement *look like*? It looks like kids interacting—talking to each other, maybe even arguing with each other, sticking to their position until they’ve persuaded their peers that their “side” is the right one. Or maybe one of their peers is more convincing, and that changes their perspective.

Discussing a variety of questions gives students continuous practice with multiple ways of viewing a text. This is helpful for students reading on or above grade level who don’t need a lot of explicit instruction on individual objectives but who can certainly benefit from exposure to all kinds of angles from which to view their reading. For capable readers (with the assessment data to support this claim), the largest proportion of small-group time should be devoted to an instructional focus centered on discourse. In fact, asking students to respond orally to questions about a text can pinpoint specific comprehension objectives that need more explicit attention. For less proficient readers, small-group time should be divided between discourse and developing the literacy skills that will support powerful conversation about text: *constructing basic meaning* and *reinforcing skills and strategies*.

### What kinds of texts should I use?

For this instructional focus, the length of the text is less critical than its quality. A chapter from a chapter book works well, or a nonfiction article, or a short story, or a poem. Although I have encountered a few leveled texts that I would deem worthy of a great discussion, too many of these little books (often the fictional variety) just don’t measure up against the books and stories by “real” authors—the ones available to us on the shelves of our school or classroom library. Nonfiction leveled books, in my view, tend to be better. The topics are often timely. The graphics are sharp and pique students’ interest. And there are abundant text features (table of contents, glossary, index, etc.) to support comprehension. Whatever text you choose, make sure you design questions that truly probe the depths of students’ thinking.

If you fall back on questions you've asked about a favorite text for years and years, you'll be asking mostly literal-level questions that miss many of the most important ways that readers can reflect on their reading.

## What resources will I need for teaching and assessing discussion?

Some resources are generic and apply to *all* of the discussion protocols. They are included in the list below. Others are specific to individual discussion formats and can be found later in this chapter where each protocol is more fully described.

- ***Ways to Have a Good Discussion*** (discuss and post these helpful guidelines to keep students talking in a discussion), page 178
- ***Literature Discussion Prompts*** (for building students' capacity to talk about text; post these near your small-group reading area and refer to them often as you teach students to build on each other's ideas, respectfully disagree, etc.), page 179
- ***Rubric for Examining Teachers' Expertise in Leading a Discussion*** (Teachers should reflect on their capacity to elicit student discourse. Or, this rubric can be used by literacy coaches or administrators when helping teachers to improve their classroom discussions about a text), page 180
- ***Discussion Rubric for Assessing Student Discourse*** (Teachers can assess students' discussion skills using these criteria), page 181
- ***Checklist for Reflecting on Discussion Skills*** (Students can reflect on their own discussion skills using the same criteria as in the rubric above—but in a simplified format), page 182

## How do I implement this?

1. While a discussion around open-ended questions can be a stand-alone focus for a particular text, this small-group format frequently follows a lesson for *constructing basic meaning* or *reinforcing skills and strategies*. Students may reread the text to prepare for the discussion or simply reflect on their reading from the previous day.
2. The teacher should prepare a list of questions beforehand relative to a portion of text that can reasonably be discussed in one group session. The *Discussion Planner for Comprehension Strategies* suggests two questions for each strand or strategy. However, this is only a suggestion; even if the list includes eight questions, students might ultimately discuss fewer of them depending on the depth of the conversation.
3. You can give students the questions beforehand or wait until the group meets to present them. Either way can work. One advantage of distributing the questions prior to the group meeting is that students will have an opportunity to prepare their responses. "Prepare" doesn't have to mean "write." In fact, I think it is preferable for students to simply jot a few notes to remind them of their thinking with the expectation that they will elaborate more fully when they share their thoughts orally in the group.

4. Ask students to read the portion of text that will be discussed (with or without distributing the questions). Depending on the complexity of the text, you may or may not wish to do a lesson prior to your discussion that builds background: a lesson focused on the basic construction of meaning or a lesson on a specific comprehension objective—or both.
5. Bring the group together to respond orally to the questions. Remember that the goal of this focus is not just for students to develop higher-level thinking about a text, but to learn to interact more fully in a discussion. To that end, teachers also need to teach the art of discourse. Use the guidelines for *Ways to Have a Good Discussion* and *Literature Discussion Prompts* to help with this.
6. Optional: To further reinforce their thinking, students can also be asked to respond in writing to one of the questions. Note: *ONE* of the questions! We dilute the power of written response when we ask students to crank out response after response. For the purposes of this task, students can respond to a question *they* have selected (preferable). Or, the teacher can do the choosing.

### **How do I measure students' success?**

Respectful and engaged participation in the discussion based on:

**Level 1:** Teacher-prompted responses that reveal deep thinking about a text

**Level 2:** Unprompted responses that demonstrate students' deep thinking and capacity to build on each other's ideas with a teacher guiding the discussion

**Level 3:** Unprompted responses that demonstrate students' deep thinking and capacity to build on each other's ideas with a peer acting as the discussion facilitator



## WAYS TO HAVE A GOOD DISCUSSION

1. Be prepared!
2. Sit so everyone can see each other.
3. Get started right away.
4. Look at the person who is talking.
5. Listen with an open heart.
6. Ask questions to understand better.
7. Speak clearly but not too loudly.
8. Wait for the speaker to finish.
9. Signal when you want a turn.
10. Be sure everyone gets a turn.
11. Build on each other's ideas.
12. Respect each other's ideas.
13. Stay on the topic.
14. Provide evidence for your thinking.



## LITERATURE DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- I agree with \_\_\_\_\_ because....
- I agree with \_\_\_\_\_ but would like to add....
- I see it differently than \_\_\_\_\_ because....
- That's a good point, however....
- I hear what you're saying, but how about...?
- I'm confused about....Could you explain...?
- So, [name], what you mean is....
- Can you give me another example of...?
- What if...?
- [Name], what do you think about...?
- Have you ever thought about...?
- Adding on to what you are saying,....
- Are you sure? What makes you say/think that?
- For example,....
- I respectfully disagree with \_\_\_\_\_ because....
- What in the text makes you think...?



# RUBRIC FOR EXAMINING TEACHERS' EXPERTISE IN LEADING A DISCUSSION

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

Criteria	2	1	0
<b>The teacher asks questions that are well matched to the text across different thinking strands.</b>	Questions in multiple thinking strands are consistently relevant to the text with plenty of supporting text evidence.	Questions are generally relevant to the text but are not the <i>best</i> questions for the text; they may rely mostly on a couple of thinking strands.	Questions are not a good match for the text and/or focus primarily on a single thinking strand.
<b>The teacher asks higher-level questions that are open ended and elicit divergent responses.</b>	Questions are consistently open ended and promote divergent thinking (even controversy).	There is a mix of literal and higher-level questions.	The questions are almost all literal with a single, right answer.
<b>The teacher uses words and vocabulary that children can understand—but also stretches their thinking.</b>	The academic vocabulary is rich, but the teacher provides sufficient guidance.	The language of some questions makes them hard to understand.	Students are more confused than enlightened by the teacher's use of words.
<b>The teacher models the kinds of discussion behaviors that students should emulate.</b>	The teacher models good discussion behaviors and points these out to students.	The teacher may model but does not explain to students <i>how</i> to engage in similar actions.	There is no modeling; the teacher just expects students to figure things out on their own.
<b>The teacher remembers "wait time" in order to encourage student participation.</b>	The teacher always gives students the time to process a question before seeking a response.	Sometimes the teacher uses "wait time" effectively, but other times the pace is too fast.	The teacher calls on the first student to raise his hand.
<b>The teacher does not answer his own question or repeat or paraphrase students' responses.</b>	The teacher knows that faulty questioning strategies will enable, not empower, students.	The teacher sometimes paraphrases students' responses or answers her own questions.	The teacher quickly answers her own question if no student responds or if she gets an incorrect response.
<b>The teacher encourages students to talk to each other, not just to her.</b>	The teacher actively works to get students talking to each other.	The students talk to each other, but most responses come back to the teacher for grounding.	The teacher controls the talk. She poses all of the questions and decides who will talk and when.
<b>The teacher finds strategies to cope with students who try to dominate a discussion.</b>	The teacher (in a kind way) makes sure no student dominates the discussion.	The teacher is aware of domineering students but has trouble dealing with them.	The teacher clearly allows some students to dominate the discussion.
<b>The teacher finds strategies to get reticent children to respond.</b>	The teacher (in a kind way) gets even the quiet children to respond.	The teacher attempts to get quiet students involved, but is often not successful.	The teacher doesn't do anything to get the quiet kids talking—or even engaged.
<b>The teacher attends to her own nonverbal signals and those of her students.</b>	The teacher consistently attends to her nonverbal behaviors and those of her students.	The teacher is aware of the impact of nonverbal cues but does not always attend to them.	The teacher is oblivious to nonverbal cues from her students or herself.
<b>The teacher avoids questions with obvious or one-word answers.</b>	The teacher words questions carefully to avoid "giving away" the answer or allowing students to answer in one word.	Sometimes students can figure out the answer by the order of answer choices, or they can respond with a single word.	Many answers are obvious; there are too many yes/no responses.



## DISCUSSION RUBRIC FOR ASSESSING STUDENT DISCOURSE

STUDENT: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

	2	1	0
<b>Demonstrates preparation for the discussion</b>	Participation in the discussion demonstrates close reading of the text with many specific text references	Student has clearly read the text, though there are not too many specific details cited	Student does not appear to have read or understood the text; does not refer to specific textual details; references do not make sense
<b>Listens attentively to peers</b>	Shows genuine interest in peers' responses; tracks speaker	Generally focused on response of speaker; sometimes appears distracted or too eager to state own point of view	Does not pay attention to the speaker; off task or too focused on sharing own ideas
<b>Highly engaged; volunteers ideas, but does not dominate discussion</b>	Consistently contributes insightful comments and ideas with good sense of how much talking is appropriate	Sometimes contributes to discussion, but contributions do not show much critical thinking; may try to participate too much	Seldom participates—even when called on by the teacher; very passive or even disruptive
<b>Respects opinions of other group members</b>	Waits until the previous speaker is finished; encourages and supports the opinions of others, even when disagreeing	Generally respectful, but sometimes interrupts speaker or disagrees in a negative way	Interrupts frequently; becomes argumentative when disagreeing
<b>Builds on peers' ideas with comments or further questions</b>	Integrates past comments into own comments; extends ideas by posing additional questions or following up on peers' comments	Sometimes builds on peers' responses with further comments or questions; sometimes changes topic back to own interest	Follow-up comments have nothing to do with preceding conversation; never asks questions
<b>Rethinks opinion based on ideas of other group members</b>	Synthesizes information from multiple sources in order to develop more informed opinion	Sometimes willing to change stance based on input from group members	Emphatically defends own stance—in spite of conflicting evidence

**Areas of strength:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Areas of need:**

\_\_\_\_\_



## CHECKLIST FOR REFLECTING ON DISCUSSION SKILLS

**NAME:** \_\_\_\_\_ **DATE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Today we had a discussion about:** \_\_\_\_\_

---

- I was prepared for this discussion. I did all the reading and thought about what I might say.
- I listened carefully to other people in my group. I looked at them and concentrated on what they were saying.
- I joined the discussion without my teacher asking me. I showed that I was interested. I gave other people the chance to talk, too.
- I was polite even when I disagreed. I didn't act like my answer was the only good answer.
- I connected my response to another speaker's response. I said things like, "My opinion is almost the same as Tim's except..."
- I was open minded. I was willing to change my opinion if someone else had a really great idea.

My best moment in this discussion was when: \_\_\_\_\_

---

When I am participating in a discussion, I need to get better at:

---

---