

# STUDENT-LED DISCUSSIONS

*How do I promote rich conversations  
about books, videos, and other media?*

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a focus lesson, teachers discuss how the process might be applied to students' own discussions and outline what they'll be looking for during their observations.

Growth in meaningful discussions has a cumulative influence on reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Therefore, explicit instruction through the use of focus lessons should occur at each grade level. Within each focus lesson, students need to be given opportunities to practice the new skill with guidance prior to practicing on their own. The early stages of learning are critical in determining future success because initial errors can become ingrained and difficult to fix. Therefore, students' initial attempts at new strategies and skills should be carefully monitored and, when necessary, guided so they are accurate and successful.

After the focus lesson, students should get together in small groups to practice the task. Your role as teacher is to move among the groups, taking notes and offering assistance if discussion breaks down. Be careful not to jump in and offer advice if there is just a lull in the conversation. Some struggle is necessary for students to develop and become self-directed learners.

The amount of time allocated to student-led discussions may vary depending on the grade level and students' ages; however, all group discussions should begin with less time and gradually add time as students' stamina develops. Generally speaking, when their stamina is fully developed, 20–30 minutes is often sufficient for good, rich, deep discussions to take place. Given too much time, conversations may drift

In short, yes! They are absolutely capable of beginning conversations about text read aloud by the teacher or from books appropriate to their reading level. In the early grades, students will be most successful when they begin this work in pairs.

Support is especially important for young learners as they begin the process of having conversations about text with partners or in triads. To help these students get started, text frames and anchor charts are structures they need to grow their conversation skills.

Student-led discussions require a great deal of teacher support at the beginning, but with careful planning and explicit instruction, students can become more independent in this work. In the beginning, the teacher often selects texts that will be of interest to students and that allow them the ability to apply an appropriate comprehension strategy from the focus lesson.

In the primary grades, students who will be working together should read the same texts. As students become more skilled, they can be encouraged to read and discuss books by the same author or books that are based on a common topic. Since picture books and early chapter books are generally short in length, children typically read the whole book before they have a discussion rather than reading shorter sections and having several discussions (i.e., like older students who read longer books).

What do early readers talk about when they begin working independently in pairs and triads? The focus of their discussions can be on sharing new information they learned;

of the folktale they read. Remember that it's critical for the teacher to model a good conversation and remind students of the qualities of a good conversation.

When students are engaged in these conversations, the teacher walks around with a list of indicators (shared and discussed with students earlier), noting specific examples he or she will share with students later in the lesson. This type of data collection and feedback should be given at the end of each lesson for students to make necessary adjustments in how they conduct and interact during discussions. (See Video 6: Discussion, Grade 2: Comparing and Contrasting.)

Even though all students may not be able to meet the various mandated standards at a proficient level, many experience great growth and success when they are afforded opportunities to practice strategies independently. In addition, their communication skills can only develop through structured practice with specific feedback from the teacher. Most importantly, their love of reading increases with each opportunity to practice and communicate about high-quality, rich literature.

### **Prompts for Reflective Dialogue:**


- What strategies could be taught to support students in the primary grades as they work toward independence in their conversations about texts?
- What skills do primary students need in order to move from having conversations about texts with a partner to working in triads and small groups?

practice in their small groups. Other focus lessons continued to build with more detailed information.

Key concepts of subsequent focus lessons included the following

- Evaluating other group members' use of evidence.
- Absorbing, understanding, and considering ideas and points of view from other group members without debating and arguing every point.
- Comprehending and evaluating texts in order to construct effective arguments and convey intricate or multifaceted information.
- Evaluating other points of view critically and constructively.
- Discerning a group member's key points, requesting clarification, and asking relevant follow-up questions to keep the discussion flowing.

What happens when discussions get stuck? One 9th grade Language Arts teacher used a Socratic Seminar to facilitate student-led discussions and make their practice more visible since students were having difficulty citing textual evidence during discussions. The teacher posed a question to get the conversation started and then instructed students in the inner circle to talk to one another about it. She encouraged each to contribute to the discussion while focusing on four relevant skills: responding to the anchor question, elaborating on another student's question or idea, asking additional open-ended questions, and citing evidence



grade level. She asks students who are at or above level if they would like to be involved in two groups. If one or two students choose to be included in the group with below-level readers, their role is to keep the conversation going by drawing other students in, generating some thought-provoking questions, and modeling effective facilitation skills.

**Q** What can I do to motivate students to read the assigned text?

**A** Access to high-quality books that students actually want to read is the first step in motivating them to read. It's also important to provide students with some choice in what they read, even if the choice is initially limited to just two different selections. Other students discussing texts they enjoy reading is often all the motivation reluctant readers need to get started. When students have access, choice, and opportunities to talk about text, they are more apt to read.

**Q** How often should students have student-led discussions?

**A** To develop their ability to engage in meaningful, powerful discussions, students need to practice regularly. Some teachers find time every day for students to engage in some type of discussion—either in pairs, small groups, or a Socratic Seminar—whereas other teachers